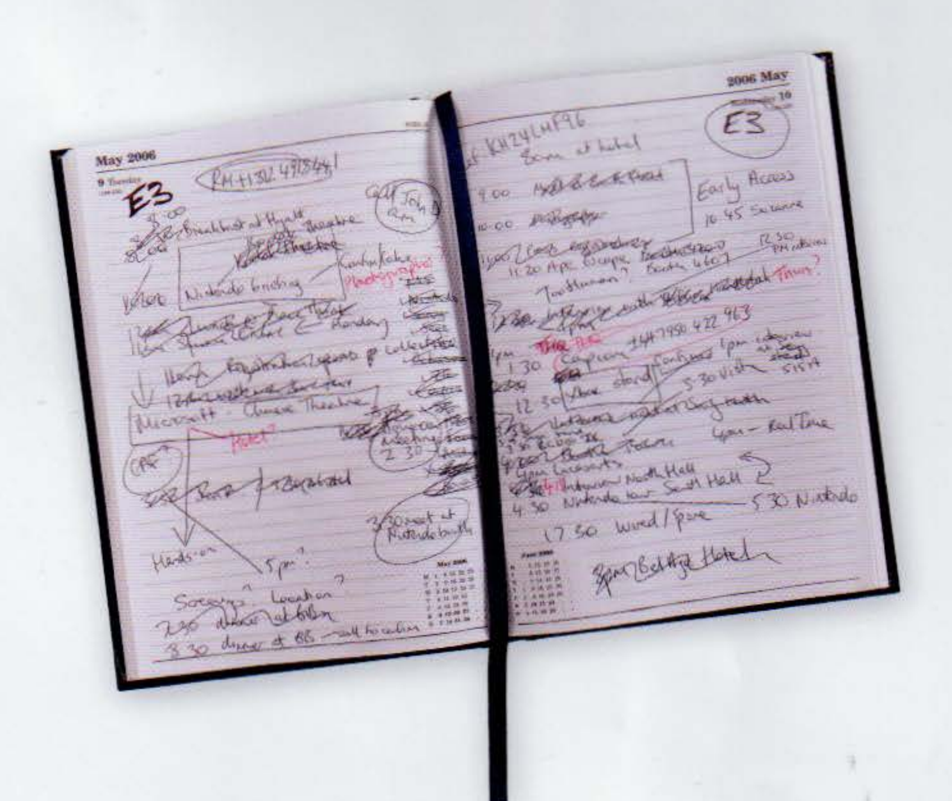

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9 Tuesday
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Breakfast at Hyatt
Nintendo briefing
Microsoft · Chinese Theatre
Hands-on
5pm?
Location?
2006 May
10
E3
8am at hotel
Early Access
10.45
Tuesday?
4.30 Nintendo tour South Hall
5.30 Nintendo
7.30 Wired/Spore



Where were you when you first saw it? First heard it? First said it? Watershed gaming moments are often private affairs – sitting down with a new game for the first time in the quiet of your own home – but this one spread round the globe in minutes, uniting gamers in a wave of disbelief, amusement and despair. We'll all remember the moment Wii arrived.

It was an electrifying moment and those are rare, even in the excitable world of videogames. To create that strong a response, an event needs to be both unexpected and slightly troubling: there's nothing electric about simple good news. And, on that front, this was an unusually rewarding E3. There were no leaks, nothing to take the thrill out of hearing the news as it happened. Wii, wisely announced before the event itself, came out of nowhere – no prior hints dredged up from domain name registrations or logo drafts. Sony's big news, the pricing of its console and the capabilities of its controller, was also out of the blue, and has produced an similarly equivocal response. And Microsoft's presentation of Live Anywhere, despite Bill Gates' reassuring tones, is an agressive move which raises hard questions as well as potential GamerScores. These moments were electrifying because it isn't immediately easy to know what to think. Is Wii the first nail in Nintendo's coffin or a brave – if ill-advised – bit of free-thinking? Does the PS3 controller make Wii obsolete or show Sony on the backfoot? Are consumers still willing to spend what they used to on game consoles, or has the PS3 priced itself out of the market? Is the idea of a gaming world that follows you from your desk to journey home to sofa a dream come true, or do you have misgivings about Microsoft owning your gaming identity so completely?

And so our E3 report, which starts on p8, gives you a chance to chew over the facts, and hear from Iwata, Harrison and Moore how they explain their decisions. And our game coverage, which starts on p28, shows how those decisions will affect the games you'll be playing this year and next. Even if the buzz of Wii has worn off, there's no shortage of candidates to set hearts racing again.





EDGE

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"When I was five my father introduced me to a friend of his and for no reason at all I hit him right in the stomach with all my strength and a year later he died."







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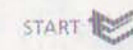
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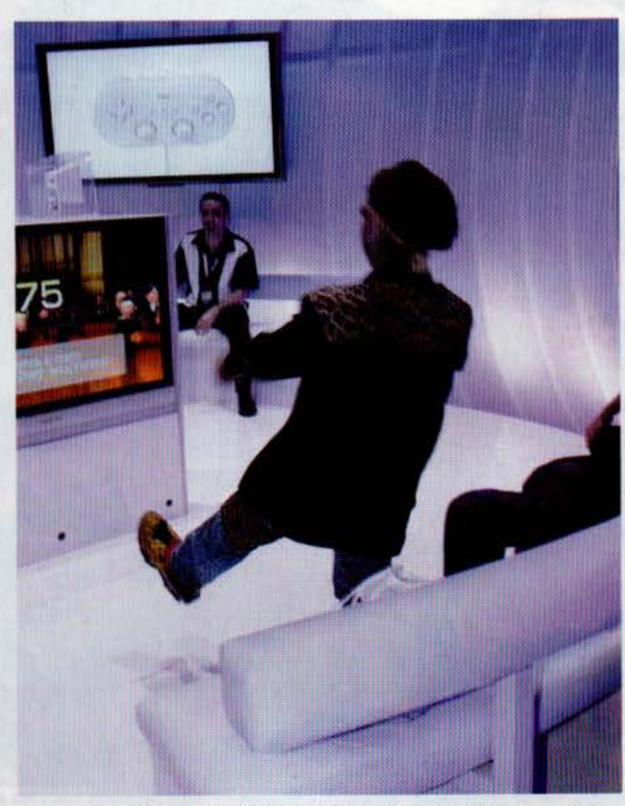
News of PS3 pricing, release dates and new motion-sensing controller steals the limelight from Wii's first public appearance

E3 is never short of defining images, but this year they were images of people, not of huge projector screens drenched in pixels. SCEA president Kaz Hirai holding up a PSP playing the original *Ridge Racer*; Miyamoto jiving during a Wii demonstration; Bill Gates fiddling with his teleprompter remote as he genially described Microsoft's plans to dominate every aspect of non-console gaming. Last year was an E3 of promises, with 360 unfinished and PS3 and Wii unplayable; this year was a fascinating reality check.

It was Sony that had made the biggest promises, and it was apt that it was the first to declare its hand. Its press event, held in a characterless back-lot at Sony Pictures' studios in Culver City, had an appropriately epic feel, with the progress of three consoles to report on. Hirai began by rehearsing the overwhelming success of the PS2 (over 100 million units of hardware sold, and a billion pieces of software), and standing firm on the vision for PSP (17 million hardware units and close to 50 million pieces of software shipped) despite increasing anxieties about software performance. It made for a slow build up to what everyone was there to see: what can the PS3 really do, and what will it really cost?

The most basic answer to that first question is that it can play games. After last year's videos, it was crucial that Sony demonstrated live gameplay, and a new *Gran Turismo* demo, called *Gran Turismo HD*, effectively broke that duck. Running in 1080p, and rich with the clarity expected from the *GT* series, it seemed a slightly odd choice to set the agenda for the machine. Despite Hirai's assertions that PS3 was more than a simple incremental improvement on PS2, Kazunori Yamauchi, creator of *GT*, was quick to clarify that *GTHD* is built on modified *GT4* tech. The level of detail, particularly when blown across the vast projection screen, was breathtaking, but comparisons with previous *GT*s made clear both the promises and the pitfalls of the HD revolution, since the improvement is only marked if you have a screen which can do it justice, and much of Sony's market, particularly in Europe, is yet to buy into lower-grade HD, let alone 1080p.

After last year's videos, it was crucial that Sony demonstrated live gameplay, and a new Gran Turismo demo, called Gran Turismo HD, effectively broke that duck



The defining image of E3 2006: Wii was intended to democratise gaming, and it does so very effectively, making beginners of everyone, however long their associating with gaming. Its intuitive nature means that beginners rapidly become proficient, however

Having sketched out the plans for PS3's online environment at GDC, it was also crucial for Sony to demonstrate in more concrete terms how the service will work. The first piece of the puzzle is e-distribution, which will form a backbone for both PSP and PS3, enabling game downloads and micro-transactions, managed by pre-payment cards in real currencies. Hirai demonstrated where your online pounds might be spent by showing the original PlayStation *Ridge Racer* downloaded onto PSP. Not to underestimate the affection many have for the game, it seemed an odd choice, especially since *Ridge* is one of the few PS titles to have been sumptuously updated for the PSP itself.

To demonstrate how this system will integrate into PS3, producer Paulina Bozek was on hand to show how the SingStore will turn *SingStar* from a



NCSoft was reportedly the only stand which broke E3's noise level rules

The Vivendi *Scarface* stand was suitably outrageous and opulent

Sony's PS3 demos were consistently busy, but rarely over-crowded

THQ's imposing *Saint's Row* mock-up depicted a seedy, shabby backstreet

The optional traditional Wii controller, for use with Virtual Console games, is stylish, but slightly impractical, still requiring to be plugged in to the Remote, and with the Z-button tucked up beyond the right shoulder button, out of reach of smaller hands

In private, Nintendo showed off a Pulp Fiction-style suitcase of prototype replica Wii controllers for Virtual Console games

standalone product to an evolving mainstay of the console. New tracks will continually be made available, and players can share videos of their performances with their friends. The *SingStar* environment sits within the overall online service, which had a slick, if slightly uncharismatic, design: it's not yet clear whether or not the look and feel is finished or still a work in progress. Each game will have its own portal within this service, tailored to its style and needs, but presumably based on the same basic framework to ease navigation. A now familiar range of downloads should be available, including demos, standalone games and in-game items, as well as the expected services: friends lists, online rankings, profiles and messaging. It's clear that Sony will take a far less controlling approach to its new online world than Microsoft has, which should provide more variety and choice, but raises questions about the overall quality and consistency of the experience.

In the end, it fell to *Heavenly Sword* to actually put some weight behind Sony's claim that the next generation doesn't start until it says so. Luminously beautiful, the fluidity of the animation and organic feel of the battles produced something which felt like a true step-change from the games of the last generation of machines. And just in time, as next came a familiarly-stunning set of videos with the equally familiar problem of judging what was in-engine and what was pre-rendered. After the footage from *Lair*, *The Getaway* and a new London Studio title, *8 Days*, the stage was given over to



The DS Lite goes on sale in the UK on June 23, in black and white versions

The sensor for the Wii Remote is now a shorter, sleeker all-in-one bar

For many, the best sight of the show was the tower of final PlayStation 3 dev kits, on which the demos ran

Microsoft (above) won the best press conference PowerPoint award, while Miyamoto's conducting (middle) took best live act. Many at the Sony event (top) didn't notice the PS3 demo pods

The PS3 controllers at the show – presumably still prototypes – had improved analogue sticks without the DualShock 2's deadzone, but they still felt woolly compared to the 360's crisp response, especially without rumble. The 360 HD-DVD player (right) will be available before Christmas

Insomniac's Ted Price for a live demo of *Resistance: Fall Of Man*, which was intense and atmospheric, but seemed not to make distinctive use of its 1950s alternate history setting.

But if this had elevated the mood, Snake was back to stamp it down. An even more downbeat demo than last year's video, the new *Metal Gear Solid 4* trailer painted a dust-choked picture of a suicidal hero and a dynamic, physical sense of combat. The tone of the story may have been depressed, but the effect of the footage, all in-engine, was to ignite a real sense of excitement about what the PS3 will be able to deliver once it's been given a chance to stretch its legs.

But then, the big guns. Phil Harrison, and his ducks, returned to the stage to reveal that the PS3 controller would be close to identical to the PS2's DualShock, only with the added capabiliy of motion sensing. Accelerometer based, rather than offering the positional awareness of the Wii, it requires no separate sensor and can detect movement across three axes of posture (pitch, roll and yaw) as well three-dimensional acceleration information. To demonstrate its potential, Incognito's Dylan Jobe arrived to show how *Warhawk* could be controlled through movement alone, the aircraft accurately responding to the gentle tilts and dives he put the controller through.

Then came the pricing: two different packs,

Phil Harrison, and his ducks, returned to the stage to reveal that the PS3 controller would be close to identical to the PS2's DualShock, only with the added capability of motion sensing

with either a 60GB or 20GB hard drive, retailing in Japan (from November 11) for a price set freely by retailers for the 20GB unit, and ¥59,500 (£283) for the 60GB pack, in the US (November 17) for $499 (£266) and $599 (£319), and in Europe (November 17) for €499 (£340) and €599 (£408). In the UK it looks likely that the 60GB version will go on sale at £425 and that the 20GB version may not be available at all, as with the PSP core pack. Despite everyone being braced for a high price, there was still an intake of breath at the news. The 360, which will undoubtedly have its price dropped before PS3's release, currently sits at £280/£200 and $399/$299 (£213/£159) for its premium and core packs. While the PS3's price has lead to speculation that it will hurt sales, retailers had little trouble selling 360 launch bundles at £800 or more, indicating that consumers are willing to spend to secure new hardware.

And that, for the press conference, was that. The final fumble in what was widely accepted to be an underwhelming media event was that many attendees didn't understand the final announcements from the stage, instructing them that the video display towers at the edges of the room were also to function as demo pods, and

Metal Gear Solid 4's in-engine trailer was the hit of the Sony presentation

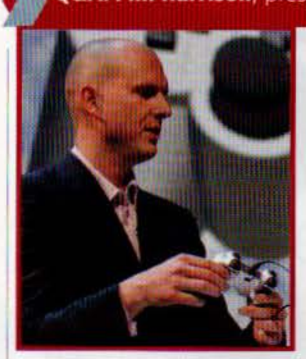
The *Halo 3* (left) gave little away in terms of plot, but the first look at *Final Fantasy XII* (above) showed its *FFXII* heritage

many people unwittingly streamed out the exits without realising they were feet away from their first change to play PS3. As a result, after an hour or so many pods were deserted.

For many, that was the impression they formed of Sony's PS3 E3 performance, but it was a decidedly unfair one. It may have been a poorly staged event, but that was only an event. Away from the stage, the balance was much harder to pitch. After so many months of PS3 feeling remote, it now feels real, which was the single thing Sony most wanted to accomplish. Whipping Nariko around the screen in *Heavenly Sword*, and twisting under buttresses in *Warhawk*, the PS3 is now tangible: a powerful machine with a proven controller, an unrivalled breadth of software within an all-encompassing online environment, all supported by a prodigiously persuasive brand. It would be no wiser now than it has been in the past to underestimate the power of Playstation.

But despite that core strength, as E3 went on a more detailed but less cohesive picture of the PS3 began to build. The controller may have gained movement control, but it has lost rumble, which Sony claimed is due to a conflict between the two systems – although rumours persist that it's the result of the ongoing Immersion Corporation lawsuit which found that Sony had infringed its patents. The console now supports only four, not seven, pads – and its ability to function as a router has been lost. More surprisingly, the 20GB pack will not offer an HDMI output, and is also without wifi. Although the hard drive can be upgraded and a wifi card installed, it's not clear if HDMI can be added, or that consumers are currently well

Q&A: Phil Harrison, president of SCE's Worldwide Studios



How do you feel the press conference went?
The presentation itself went very smoothly. I think we crammed a huge amount of games, live, into a slightly longer presentation than had been anticipated – and apologies for keeping everybody waiting – but we managed to get a lot of live gameplay on stage. And that was really a key objective – to say it's no longer video, it's games in your hands, you can actually play them.

There was a general feeling that attendees came out of this year's presentation less enthused than they were coming out of last year's.
Yeah, I agree with that, and I don't quite know why that is. I guess, um, when something is new and exciting and heard for the first time, that elicits a certain reaction emotionally, compared to when you're just confirming something that people already know.

What sort of feedback have you had since?
Well, I think that the way I'd describe it is that the pieces of the puzzle are all there – PlayStation 3 is kind of laid out for everybody to see. The hardware was well understood and well defined last year; now it's a network platform and it's HDD in every box, and it's the new controller, and it's the games, and it's the Blu-ray disc player – we're showing the OS and the cross-media bar here at the booth, and you can see the functionality for music and movies and photos and network and all that stuff together. It's beautiful. It's really lovely.

Talking of looks, what happened to last year's controller design?
Do you want it back?

Not especially. Well, we didn't actually get the opportunity to hold it...
I don't think anybody did, and we were very careful, actually, to say that it was a design prototype at that point. I think – hindsight is always with 20:20 vision – but I think in hindsight it might have been better to have shown no controller rather than confuse people. The fact is, we have the industry-standard de facto controller in this shape, and if you combine the ones that have been packed in the box and those sold separately and the same shape sold by third parties, about 400m of these units have been sold, and that's billions of hours of play time. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. By adding the motion sensors to it, as well, we've innovated.

And have you refined it, by putting more sensitivity in the analogue sticks?
The dynamic range of movement is higher, and also this movement here [pointing to the centre of a controller's analogue stick] is actually detectable inside the controller, and that refinement actually makes a huge difference. It's quite a subtle message to get across, but when you feel it, you actually realise what it means. Right now, on this PlayStation 2 controller, that movement [makes tiny movements with the analogue stick] is actually the dead centre in the middle, and it doesn't do anything, but on the PlayStation 3 controller you can actually pick that up as motion.

"The presentation went very smoothly. We managed to get a lot of live gameplay on stage, and that was really a key ojective – to say it's no longer video, it's games in your hands and you can actually play them"

Moving on to software, and specifically *Grand Theft Auto*. Why does Sony no longer have an exclusivity period with this franchise?
[Pause] I don't know. I mean, I'm the firstparty software guy, not the thirdparty software guy, but I think that *GTA* has been incredibly important to PlayStation 2 in the PlayStation 2 era, perhaps in the same way that *Tomb Raider* had an impact in the PlayStation 1 era, and maybe there's something else in the PlayStation 3 era. That doesn't belittle what importance *GTA* on PS3 will have. And it was very kind of Microsoft to announce a multiformat title at its press conference.

Talking of Microsoft, what do you think of its projection of shipping ten million 360s before you've sold one PS3?
What Microsoft did very cleverly was to *predict* momentum rather than state a fact. Come on, you know that better than anybody – you don't need to ask me to debunk that.

Here's a question from one of our readers: 'When you speak to Phil Harrison, can you please ask him about his derogatory comments regarding two-tier consoles and motion tracking in











(Clockwise from left) *Lair* (PS3) reprised its role as pre-rendered darling; *Fable 2* (360) hinted at a more modern setting; *The Getaway* (PS3) trailer carried a real sense of menace; *Super Smash Brothers: Brawl* (Wii) saw even Nintendo getting in on the CG action; *Alan Wake* (PC) once again won admirers with little info and *8 Days* (PS3) left most wondering how much of its footage was fully in-engine

controllers, bearing in mind that these features have now been adopted wholesale by his company?'
OK, what I said, unambiguously, was that we would never give the consumer cause for confusion, and that we would be very clear about our product offering. The PlayStation 3 format is exactly the same between the two SKUs. Our competitor has a different format between the two SKUs – one with a hard drive, one without – but all PlayStation 3s have a hard drive. So I was very clear, and I stick by that comment, that we will be unambiguous in the way we present our product to the world, but we are going to allow the consumer to pick the machine that best fits their digital lifestyle. So if you're a gamer who doesn't need HDMI, then buy that machine; if you are a digital media consumer who wants to put their entire music, video and game collection on their hard drive, then buy the 60GB version, and in either case if you want to upgrade it and put a 600GB hard drive in, you can, because it's a standard hard drive.

What about the motion-sensing issue?
I've never, in my life, ever been disparaging about that, because I've always thought that's a great innovation. I mean, not that I'm responsible... well, I am responsible for EyeToy, which was all about sensing motion, so I, er, can't recall ever having said that...

So, what was the thinking, specifically, behind the motion-sensing capacity of the new controller?
Well, we've had a user-interface R&D group within our headquarters in Japan since 1994, and they've filed a number of patents and made a number of inventions in controllers which are experimented with and played with, but some never come to market because of cost, or some never come to market because we couldn't make them in sufficiently big enough volumes, um, and what we have with the PlayStation 3 controller is the kind of convergence of cost and technology allowing these things to happen for the first time. No surprise that that's not exclusive to us, and we never made any claims about that, but what I think we've done quite cleverly is combine this industry-standard controller with the motion-sensing technology, and what that means for game design and gameplay is really quite interesting because it allows us to get two-channel input. What I mean by that is you've got a primary input, which may be a traditional interface of sticks and buttons, but at the same time we can detect secondary motion from the physical movement of a controller. We've all done this – you sit on the couch playing a game, you want to turn more, you do this [leans]. Well, for the first time we can now detect both motions – the primary input of the stick and the secondary motion of the controller. And that will inform game design in a very interesting way.

With motion sensing you're introucing another layer of control at a time when people are already concerned that joypads are too complex. Isn't this making it even more complicated?
No, I disagree.

Well, there's activity on the face of the joypad, and also on the shoulder buttons, and now there's movement..
When I said that we would read two channels of input simultaneously, that doesn't mean that the secondary channel has to be known by the player, or even in the instruction manual. I'm talking about much more subtle concepts than, say, in order to perform a special move you have to perform a wiggle movement. I didn't mean that. What I mean is, I can tell the emotional state of the player by what they're doing with the controller, and that can inform game design in a very subtle way. Now, that might not be entirely clear to the player. We may make it very clear to them, but we may make less clear to them and use it for making games easier and more accessible.

So you could tell when the controller is being flung across the room in frustration?
Yes.

So, what do you think about Nintendo's approach this time around?
I haven't had a chance to see it, so I can't give you a personal view, but what I've read and heard is that their technology solution is a little bit better than GameCube, it's not really a dramatic innovation or movement forward. The big question is whether having *only* an unusual controller is going to be attractive to both game designers and game players. And until I see it and get a chance to feel it for myself, it's really hard for me to comment. What do you think?

Well, the big question coming into E3 was: does it actually work? And it does.
I think the big, big difference is that the PS3 controller requires no external calibration device. And I think **Edge** readers will have no problem setting up a little doohicky on the side of their televisions, but I'm not sure that my mum will be able to do that. The idea of setting up another bit of technology may be a hurdle that **Edge** readers will have no problem with. Will the kind of game experiences that Nintendo's trying to make work for that sort of audience? I don't know.



Microsoft's stand was enormous, and offered a welcome chance to sit

By Friday afternoon the Nintendo booth was still buzzing (above), while Sony's queues had dried up (top right). At other times of the show the contrast was more to do with the layout of each stand: Sony's gave quick, free access, Nintendo's created queues

Even at its busiest, there was room to breathe on this year's show floor

enough versed in HD technology to understand what they would be choosing between. That confusion might well be shared by developers, few of whom had had more than a few weeks' notice of the motion sensor and some who hadn't even realised rumble had been dropped.

This uncertainty made life very easy for Microsoft and Nintendo, both of whom had been forced by Sony's dominance to streamline their visions of the future. But for Nintendo, before using their press conference as yet another opportunity to explain the vision behind the console's disruptive design, there was the matter of that name to deal with. Although it had wisely been announced a couple of weeks before the event, to give the tittering time to die out, many E3 attendees still weren't accustomed to saying "Wii" out loud. Reggie Fils-Amie, NOA's head of marketing, was typically bullish about it, cracking a few jokes before indicating that the subject was closed. It wasn't of course, instead forming the easiest conversation-starting gambit of the week, but there was no question that the more you hear it, the less ridiculous it sounds. Quite what the wider world will make of it will only be seen once the run up to launch – confirmed to be before the end of the year – begins, but within the industry the amusement value is already wearing off.

With the jokes and the theory out of the way, what was left for Nintendo to do was prove that Wii really worked, and that the system could really support a range of varied and fully-fledged games. And this it did, with such flair and theatre that it was easy to overlook that the company could only fill its time by showing each game twice. The obvious Wii applications were the star of the show: Miyamoto conducting a *Zelda* medley, complete with white tie and tails, in *Wii Music Orchestra*, and a competition winner putting in a convincing performance against Fils-Amie, Miyamoto and Iwata in *Wii Tennis*. And the obvious Nintendo games received their customary rapturous welcome: *The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess* was confirmed as being a dual release for GameCube and Wii, *Metroid Prime: Corruption* performed as slickly on Wii as it was always expected to, and *Super Mario Galaxy* – which was strangely given second billing to *Red Steel*, perhaps an indication of Nintendo's determination to better

Q&A: Peter Moore, corporate VP, Microsoft



So, first question: when are you announcing your motion sensitive controller?
[Chuckles] I thought we had one in the cupboard... Y'know, we used to have one a long time ago. It will be interesting to see if it's a fundamental part of the ship. I've just been over at Sega playing *Sonic* and *Super Monkey Ball*, and that's actually a lot of fun, but the Sony one I don't quite get.

Looking on your stand on the way in, of the retail 360 games, there are a lot of men with guns. Is that...
There's piñata...

There's one piñata.
There's 60 piñatas! But from a firstparty point of view you're right, there's *Mass Effect*, which is a beautiful a sci-fi RPG, *Too Human*, *Crackdown* is men with guns although beautifully-styled men with guns, and then *Shadowrun* is guns and magic... and then *Fable 2*... and obviously we've got lots of stuff coming from Rare that we can't talk about yet, not men with guns, but maybe with guns every now and then. We're recognising that. What you're not seeing is Arcade, and the power of Arcade. It's a very important part of 360 and it's difficult to show Arcade if you've not got enough stands, but it's a very important part of the diversification of the mood and the feel we're after. But whether you like it or not, guys like men with guns. I briefly went by EA and I saw a lot of men with guns, same with Activision. If it wasn't for World War II, I don't think this industry would be in business any more... So you're a little heavier weighted at the front end of the cycle with that kind of genre. But, then you got men with chainsaws, too...

So do you see a straight split between consumers, that you can put more variety in for casual Arcade players, but for the kind of people who are willing to pay £50 for a retail game you'll always need to supply men with guns?
I didn't expect Live Arcade to be for gamers, I thought maybe for their girlfriends, mums and sisters – but it's for everybody. And after 40 hours of sitting in this room over the last four days of talking, it's clear that everybody plays Arcade, everybody wants to figure out how to get the Pacifist Achievement in *Geometry Wars*, everybody wants to figure out *Zuma*'s easiest way for racking up Achievements. It's clear that it's an addictive catalogue right now that will only get better with time, and that's as much for my wife as for my 20-year-old son, who's really into *Marble Blast Ultra*.

What we aren't seeing, and what you're maybe not even looking for, is taking mums and girlfriends from the Arcade environment, and into the retail one...
We're eventually going to put Arcade into retail SKU, we'll do that. What we are seeing that's interesting, after doing a lot of research on the usage of the 360 in homes – while previously it was the domain of the alpha male in the home, 'Don't touch my console'. Now we're seeing multi-person usage – little sister, because of family settings, gets to use it because there have been four or five games downloaded that she can play. And there's plenty coming, like *Lumines Live*, which will be very cool. What we're now seeing is the change from alpha male to the multi-usage, which is important because it breaks down the barriers for everyone in the house. Another thing we see is guys giving their wives and girlfriends their gaming profiles because of Achievements – it's a big deal, I'm finding. I was on the road a couple of weeks ago with some of my guys, all of whom are married, and they all agree that they let their wives play certain games so their Gamerscore goes up.

"There's a guy on Geometry Wars – his score is far above anyone else in the world, and it makes me think this person doesn't have a life, doesn't work and is completely and sickly addicted to this one game,"

What's the internal response been to the guys who are really hammering 360 in terms of Achievement points. How do you feel about the fact that the people at the top are the people who have the most unhealthy attitude towards their gaming life?
There's guy on *Geometry Wars*, I can't remember his Gamertag, but his score is far above anyone else in the world, and it makes me think this person doesn't have a life, doesn't work, and is completely and sickly addicted to this one game. I think there's a level where people go overboard with Achievements, and people pay no attention to that. Then you got the regular guys with scores of 4,000 or so, shows that



The PSP stands showed off its new camera, available later in 2007


Activision limited their sneak peak at *Spiderman 3* to the Spidey model

Microsoft keep showing faceplates: retailers keep not selling them

showcase thirdparty games – was unveiled to gasps of delight. More surprising was the fact that the middle ground of more conventional games is also being filled by Nintendo this time round, with the announcement of *Excite Truck*, *Disaster: Day Of Crisis* (seemingly inspired by *SOS: The Final Escape*) and *Project Hammer*.

It did a good job of disguising the fact that thirdparty support is currently rather thin, with Ubisoft's *Rayman Raving Rabbids* the most interesting title shown at the event. And there was little in the way of other news, save the announcement of a speaker in the Wii Remote, a little piece of bargain-basement surround sound which will let the player hear the 'ding' of a collected coin or the twang of Link's bow. This was followed by the announcement of Wii Connect24, which puts the console into a low power standby mode that allows its internet connection to be maintained, meaning that fresh content can be pushed to the machine and persistent worlds like those of *Animal Crossing* can stay open for round-the-clock visitors. But Nintendo itself wanted to make the case that the press conference wasn't the point. 'Playing = Believing' is the new Wii motto, and visitors to E3 clearly agreed. On the show floor itself, Nintendo's stand was continually rammed with people, queues stretching for hours.

More unexpected was the news that the 360 version of GTA IV will launch alongside other versions on October 16 2007 in North America and October 19 in Europe

Microsoft, by comparison, was building on concretes, not promises. After a few quiet months following the 360's launch, the company's debut at E3 was assured and confident, leading off with its strong sales figures – 5 million 360s sold by June 2006, making it the fastest selling console yet – and a Live penetration rate of 57 per cent, which is continuing to grow, even as the console reaches a less hardcore audience. Many of the games showcased were already familiar, but what was much more unexpected was the news that the 360 version of *GTA IV* will launch alongside other versions on October 16 2007 in North America and October 19 in Europe.

But the quiet revolution for Microsoft isn't games, but a different kind of software. Bill Gates, in his first E3 appearance, took the stage to explain the full scope of his vision for the future of gaming. Microsoft has long been stressing that gaming is at the heart of Vista, but the full implications of that became clear as he announced Live Anywhere, an

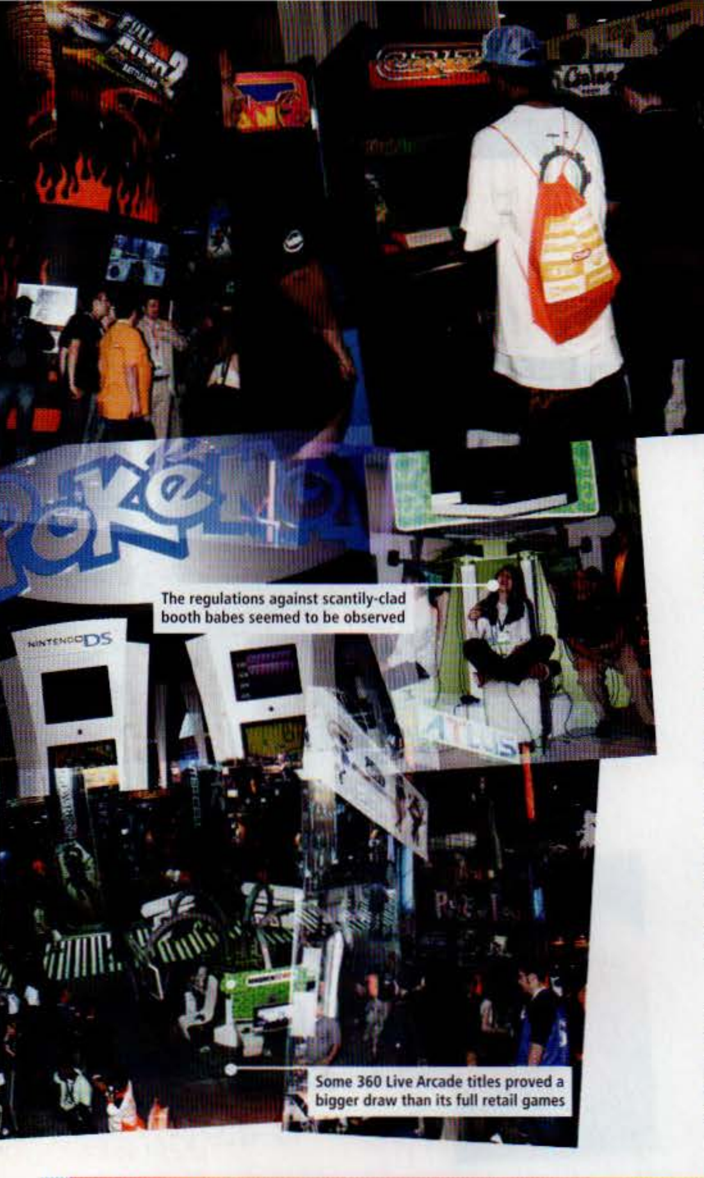
they play maybe ten hours or so a week, and those are the guys you pay attention to.

You talked about the data you were getting back in terms of how people are playing, how is that changing game design and development internally as you learn more?
One of the things we're encouraging, and we're doing right now this week is we're allowing gamers to download the *Lost Planet* demo. I met with Inafune-san yesterday – the game is still many months away, still in development, and one of the things he's doing is getting feedback from those playing the demo, Americans, Europeans and Japanese. And one of the things we talked about yesterday was, within the demo, pasting in a URL that you can use to dump any comments you have – here's the three things I love about your game, or two I think should be done differently. Free, instant feedback, before the product is finished. That is the future, of having this relationship 24-7 with the gamer, of getting instant feedback and of giving the gamer the ability to try before they buy. Great for good demos, the opposite for bad demos.

Going back to Live Arcade, things have been quiet since the initial wave, and there's been a bit of a lull in the arrival of new games. What's been behind that?
Here's what happened – people didn't believe that Arcade was going to fly. So we went round a year and a half ago as we were doing the final plans for launching 360, and told our publishing friends that here's what we think is really cool idea, where you could make games for hundreds of thousands of dollars instead of tens of millions, and at very low risk, but people didn't believe it. And we released it and it blew the doors down. Now all of a sudden we're in this phase where Sega, Namco, Konami, Midway... they want some of that. But we do have an an important quality bar in place, otherwise we could just throw 300 games up there quickly. We are trying to get the independent guys going, as well. It's almost going to be like Pop Idol, where someone will pop out suddenly – *Geometry Wars* is a great example. But I love this forum, whether it's profitable or not, this platform for indie developers, for four or five guys to put $100,000 into it, and we'll publish it and see what happens.

What do you think about what Sony's plan to offer a similar service but more unregulated?
I'd probably ask you the same thing. What I do know is that it's very hard. Even as the greatest software company in the world, we found it very hard, lots of trial and error in getting it right, lots of making sure we had all the agreements with telcos and broadband suppliers around the world, and playing with the look and the feel of the navigation – four years later, hundreds of engineers and a lot of money, this is where we're at now today. I think Sony is probably understating the challenge by saying: 'Oh yeah, we can do this.' It's not easy – server support, support for 15 languages, the complexity of running a global online network... So, we'll see. They talk a good game.

When Xbox was announced, some people were nervous and saw it as a Trojan horse, to sneak Windows into the living room, Now that you've shown more of your vision of how everything will connect, is it more the case that it's using games to tie in loyalty across all kinds of platforms?
It's about building lifestyle communities, and like-minded individuals getting together. We've all seen the MySpace phenomenon, where a quarter of a million a people a day sign up, in a community of 70 million. The power of it is that they get to interact with each other. My kids go on, and I keep a very close eye on them, but it's a lot of fun. For a majority of people, it's great way to stay in touch. There's a lot of scary elements to it, particularly in the US, I don't know if it's the same in the UK, where it's a breeding ground for bad things to happen as well. I never thought [Xbox] was a Trojan horse. We've been very clear from the get go – it's games, friends and lifestyle. Very clear, that's embedded into all of our brains here at Xbox, and without the games, it's a doorstop, it's a big old piece of plastic. Friends on top of that is very important, and it's no longer two people on the couch anymore, it's two people, but they can be anywhere. Then you build a community on top of that that makes it rich and fun, people go on Xbox Live and root around for two hours without playing a game. That's fine – it's the rich experience you build. At first we thought with Live, that it was about strangers. You and me – you're in London and I'm in Seattle – I don't know you, but I'm going to play you. But it's really about the dozen people you went to school or college with or you work with, you get together on *Halo 2* or *PGR3*'s spectator mode, and that's what it's about. The more friends you have on your list, the less likely you are to drop out of the service. You buy more games – if your friend plays *PGR*, you need *PGR*. And this ability now that Bill talked about, that it's not about hardware, the hardware is just something that powers the experience, that if you could have that at work, on your cellphone – and those hooks are in Vista already



Across the showfloor classic arcade cabinets proved popular with gamers

The regulations against scantily-clad booth babes seemed to be observed

Some 360 Live Arcade titles proved a bigger draw than its full retail games

extension of the 360's Live service which will be included in Vista and on Windows-based mobile phones. This won't simply be a unified messaging system: someone playing on a console game will be able to seamlessly invite a PC player to join them in a match, and games you buy on Live Arcade will then be available free (where versions exist) to play on your mobile phone. This may only be the beginning, however, as a slick – if speculative – demo from the *Forza* team demonstrated, suggesting that you could 'lend' a friend a car from your 360's garage by sending it to him on his phone. He would then be able to tinker with its set-up while out and about, and Live Anywhere would automatically save that data to be accessed on his return home. From his PC, he might access a customisation tool to work on his paint job, and could then sit down in front of his 360 to play with the fruits of his labours.

The implications are of Live Anywhere are substantial, not because they will necessarily change the way games are played (although the *Forza* model shows how they might), but because it may mean that games change the way we choose other technologies. Getting audio and video files onto devices is now becoming commonplace, giving you a fairly free choice of which devices and operating systems you want to use. But currently – and for the foreseeable future – only Microsoft will be able to provide an identity which unifies all your gaming experiences. So, in a few years, if you're choosing between phones with different OSes, the one which runs Windows – and therefore gives you access to your Live Arcade games and lets you add to your GamerScore while you do – will have an in-built advantage no other device can match. Similarly, for gamers wondering whether or not Vista is worth the upgrade for access to DirectX 10 alone, this may well tip the balance. In effect, it's the Trojan horse process which Xbox was rumoured to be in the first place, but the other way round: some thought that Microsoft saw games as a way to get its software onto the TV, but its real potential is to lock users into Microsoft's software on other platforms. It was a thought-provoking enough announcement that it made some attendees forget what they thought they'd been coming to see, meaning Peter Moore could casually segue into the *Halo 3* trailer as he and Gates strolled off stage. Irresistibly stirring, thanks mostly to Marty O'Donnell's music, the footage gave little away other than the instruction: 'Finish the fight. 2007.' Far more information could be gleaned from Bungie's website after the show.

And so many E3 attendees arrived on the show floor with the same agenda: to see how 360 and

Q&A: Satoru Iwata, president, Nintendo



This is the first chance you've had to see how the public responds to Wii and its new controllers – what's your impression been of their reactions to it?
In general, we have been receiving very good feedback so far, so we are very glad. The Wii controller is easy to use, and people love that, which means positive feedback. But some people in the beginning showed some hesitation. I think it is simply because they are so accustomed to the conventional gameplay style of holding one controller with both hands. I think it's an unusual feeling for players once they begin using two different controllers with two hands. For example, even inside Nintendo, those who had been working on the *Zelda* and *Super Mario* products, some of them are saying that they have had to change completely the way they play the game. At first they were uncomfortable with the new controls, but now they've been working with these controllers for a long time, they now say that they are accustomed to it, and it is rather difficult to for them to get back into the conventional way of gaming. It reminds me of what happened when Nintendo introduced the analogue stick on N64 – at that time we had the exact same feedback given to us.

Do you think it's more difficult for these people here at E3, who are used to the old way of playing games, to get used to the Wii?
I think it must be more difficult for hardcore gamers, because they are used to a certain kind of gameplay, and now we are asking them to forget about it – we are starting from scratch. But it is so intuitive that they can still get into it very quickly, and they find it very interesting. I think there are huge possibilities for non-gamers to get into it. In the case of first-person shooters, for example, in the existing game style, you are utilising two different joysticks at the same time with both hands. But we don't have to do that with the Wii controllers.

What was your reaction when you were told the news about the announcement of the motion-sensitive PlayStation 3 controller at Sony's press conference?
That was something we expected, actually. Because this is not the first time this has happened, actually [laughs]. Having said that, however, please note that putting the motion sensor into the conventional controller, which is supposed to be held by two hands, is very different from motion sensors that can be used freely and independently. And so we really don't think that other companies having a similar approach and technology will affect the advantage the our controllers bring to the Wii.

Have you made the final decisions about all the components for the finished hardware yet, or are there still some unresolved questions?

> "We hired branding experts, and they looked into any negative meanings of the name, but we don't think it's an absolute no-no for us to use it. We intentionally avoided giving the Revolution a cool name"

Almost complete, yes. Except, always, there will always be some minor modification towards the end. Actually, we have always tried to make the working model very close to the final product that will be mass-produced, and what we are doing at this moment in time is fine-tuning the hardware and the components which will be included in the final retail version of the Wii.

Are there still more things for us to learn about the Wii, or did you announce the last of its secrets in your press conference today?
One of the announcements we made was the special feature that when you turn off the power switch, Wii can activate some of its functionality with such a small consumption of energy that it's comparable to that needed to light a miniature bulb. This is how I was thinking – what kind of things can get people to turn on the power switch of Wii every day? At the moment, some people are very eager to play certain games – they dig deeply into it, and once it's completed they distance themselves from the machine for a long time, before becoming interested in other games. On the other hand, we have *Brain Age*, which is a very unique game. What the players are doing, almost every day, is doing something very short, but playing for a very long time. So applications like *Brain Age* are a very effective way for busy, contemporary people to have some connection with videogames. We want to have



The *NBA '07* PSP demo area was decked out like a basketball court

Gears Of War's 'emergence day' will be keenly awaited by many E3 goers

THQ's cheery stand for *Cars* traded on the charm of Pixar's characters

PS3 games looked side by side, to try the new Sony controller, to get a shot of *Gears Of War* and somehow, eventually, to make it to the front of the Wii queue. And most got the chance: the show was much quieter this year than last, both in terms of numbers, which were down due to stringent entry requirements, and simple noise – booths were subject to roving officials equipped with decibel meters who could demand $5,000 fines from those who broke the limit, or threaten them with pulling the plug. It gave a chance for more games to make their mark, with the perhaps unexpected result that no overall 'game of the show' emerged: for many it was *Gears Of War*, for others *Crysis*, *Mario Galaxy* or *Assassin's Creed*.

Will the simple games have enough depth to satisfy beyond the novelty of the first few hours; will controlling more elaborate games prove more complex than a traditional pad?

You can read about those, and the other games of E3, in our feature which begins on p28.

But for those bigger questions, the answers were also mixed. Some multiformat titles shown side-by-side on 360 and PS3 did look close to identical, but was very possibly the result of those games having gone into production with 360 as the lead platform. Nor was the gulf between firstparty games particularly apparent, but that too will be affected by the fact that 360 is moving towards its second generation of games before Sony has finished its launch titles. It was Wii that brought the clearest consensus: everyone thought the name was unfortunate, everyone – everyone who got the chance – had a ball playing *Tennis*, and everyone was left with the same serious concerns: will the simple games have enough depth to satisfy beyond the novelty of the first few hours; will controlling the more elaborate games actually prove *more* complex than a traditional pad; will some titles need more space, and more puff, than many gamers can provide? But those questions could never be answered on the E3 show floor, and so many were left with the simple conclusion Nintendo had been trying to create all along: it works, it's fun, and it's going to be cheap. Against the complicated backdrop of choosing between different PS3 packs, or assessing the multi-platform implications of Live Anywhere, the value of Nintendo's revolution is as clear as it's ever been.

that kind of motivation for people to turn on the switch every day.

You suggested at Tuesday's presentation that there would be new games available for the virtual console. Will you be announcing soon how the payment will work for that, and can you give an indication of what the games will cost?

As an example, *Tetris* – many people know it, it's a simple, interesting game. But because of the current standard of visuals, and in terms of number of stages and modes; it doesn't compare well to today's games. Unfortunately, for games like *Tetris*, that are simple yet very interesting, there is no way for them to be marketed in the current distribution channel. That's how today's market is, retailers and distributors require certain margins, and to develop software costs a certain amount, plus material fees etc. So there's already a fixed price range concealed in the market place. So if the maker of a *Tetris*-style game wants to sell it at $10, there's no margin for them to sell at that price. It doesn't have any prequels, or franchise or a licence. We want to break that kind of motion in the market place, and the virtual console can help, and it can be that market place for simple games. We can sell them at cheaper prices than the games in the shops, and there's no inventory.

There's been a very strong reaction to the new name. What was *your* reaction when you were first told that in English 'wee' makes people think of going to the toilet, and did it make you want to reconsider the choice?

When it comes to native English speakers, some of them say 'Are you crazy?' and there are others saying 'Oh, OK'. What we are trying to do with Wii is extend the gaming population, and reach out to non-gamers, those who would normally not play games at all. It may be difficult for them to understand that GBA stands for 'Game Boy Advance', for example. So we wanted to have a very short name that wasn't an abbreviation, we wanted a name that can be remembered by anybody as soon as they heard it. And we wanted something that does not have an association with games at all, so people do not think it is the name of a game machine. All those objectives have been set in order to expand the gaming population, and for that purpose I think we have come up with a very good name. Game Boy might cause mixed feelings at the beginning among the potential users, but after many years of the successful hardware and titles, they can think no other name than Game Boy.

In your presentation, Reggie Fils-Amie raised the point of names that sounded strange at first like Google and Lexus. But the problem with Wii isn't that it's strange, it's that it already means something else. If the idea is to attract non-gamers to the console by word-of-mouth, isn't it a mistake to give it a name that might embarrass people?

Let me ask you when you pronounce the word 'we', do you have any hesitation?

No, but it depends how you use it. For an English speaker to say 'I really need a Wii', does feel very strange. And when you think of ringing your parents or a friend to talk about the new console, you know you'll have to explain the name every time, which that makes you less eager to talk to people about it. You must have been looking at many other names as well, and it's a little hard to believe that this was the best option. Were there really no better names on your list?

We hired branding experts, and they have looked into any negative meaning of the name, but we don't think it's an absolute no-no for us to use this name. One thing I should note is the fact that we intentionally avoided naming Revolution with a game machine's name, or a cool name. We wanted to increase the gaming population and even though some people may have some feeling against Wii, we hope that someday in the future they will like it.

There is a general agreement that most of the best DS games are produced in Japan. Why do you think western game developers have had difficulty finding the best way to use DS, and do you think the same thing will happen with Wii?

I think it is because of the market situation in Japan. In Japan, several years ago, the videogame market started shrinking, and we needed to tackle that, so I think we have the advantage in coming up with a great many new ways to take advantage of the interface for Wii. In the case of western publishers, maybe they do not understand when we say that our attitudes have to change in order to reach out our hands to non-gamers as well. In the US, last year, the market was growing, and they did not believe in the theory that they needed to depend on the new users and interfaces, and all they needed to do was simply brush up on the graphics, brush up on the sound, brush up on the contents to make more games sell. But now they are starting to learn more about the interactive nature of the DS. Soon, they are going to make a number of great Nintendo DS, and great Wii, games.



TS-H943 won't benefit those working towards a 360 equivalent of the Xecuter3 modchip for Xbox (top), nor does it circumvent the region encoding that currently stops UK gamers importing from the US and Japan. But bootlegged copies of *PGR3* and others are running

HARDWARE

Piracy on the ropes?

360's first proper hack opens the door to copied games, but progress is slowing

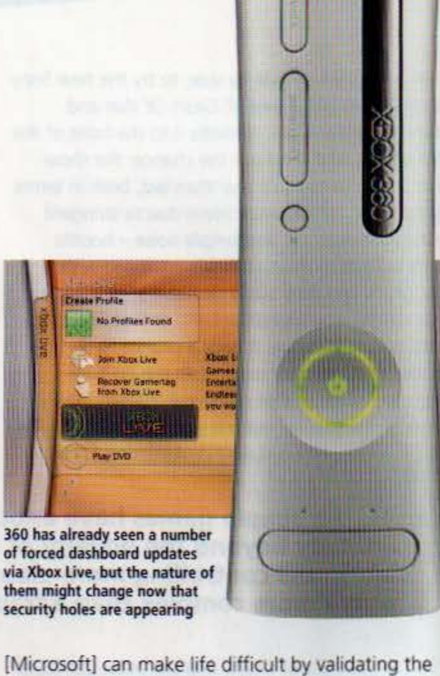
It used to be seen as the enemy within, the force that could destroy the games industry, but this month the power of piracy was also thrown into question by the nature, if not the occurrence of 360's first major hack. The redistributable TS-H943 hack is the fruit of six months' labour by the hacking community, and is the first to allow a wide selection of counterfeit games to be played on the console. But it's a demanding and dangerous procedure, with questionable benefits for those inclined to follow it. Only applicable to one of 360's two optical drive models, the firmware hack targets the authentication protocol between media and console, tricking the machine into thinking that carefully engineered, easily distributable bootleg games are legitimate.

An official response from Microsoft quickly followed the release. "The core security system has not been broken," it said. "The protection of intellectual property rights is a high priority for Microsoft and our partners, one that significantly and positively impacts economic growth, technological innovation, and most importantly, the confidence of customers who count on the integrity and quality of their products." The new hack presently allows both on- and offline play of any backup, but as co-author **Robinsod** said, to website Xboxic, of an earlier incarnation: "They [Microsoft] can make life difficult by validating the disc with greater accuracy. If they do, someone else will have to continue improving the hack, since I'm done with it now we've proven it can be done."

It's widely anticipated that Microsoft will act, forcing updates to 360's dashboard that not only close any holes in its security, but also punish those that exploit them

The suggested game of cat-and-mouse is nothing new, but hacking (and by extension piracy) has nonetheless changed. Where once it was the indomitable, inexorable force acting upon vulnerable hardware, now the roles are reversed. Sony's efforts with PSP have shown that an adaptable system, if updated with sufficient fervour, can keep hackers on the back foot. It's widely anticipated that Microsoft will act similarly, forcing updates to 360's dashboard that not only close any holes in its security, but also punish those that exploit them. Such a system only partially worked with Xbox, the threat of an Xbox Live ban undermined by the large numbers of gamers for whom Live was an irrelevance. But now it's better integrated, more refined and, crucially, seen as being key to the overall 360 experience.

And the trend is being mirrored elsewhere. In similar struggles between Steam and those wishing to emulate it, thirdparty media-check wrappers (such as the much-maligned Starforce) and those wishing to circumvent them, and OS authenticity programmes such as Windows Genuine Advantage and the unauthorised users of XP, the manufacturers are calling the shots. The trick, as Microsoft has long maintained, isn't to render the counterfeit product unusable so much as decisively inadequate. As ELSPA Anti-Piracy Unit manager **John Hillier** confirmed, "We've seen hardware manufacturers really stepping up their efforts to address [piracy]." But, he added: "We have to be realistic – piracy is unlikely to be eliminated completely in the foreseeable future."



360 has already seen a number of forced dashboard updates via Xbox Live, but the nature of them might change now that security holes are appearing



Having seen success with the Genuine Advantage programme for XP, Microsoft is stepping up the security of Windows Vista. Video piracy is a new focus, with DRM enforcement being intensified

OUT THERE



LEARNING CURVES

Seeing Microsoft's marketing campaign for 360 taken to the heights of Trump Tower was always going to be awkward, but the belated nature of this month's US transmission of The Apprentice didn't help. With J Allard both presenting and judging the week's task – to construct an in-store Wal-Mart display for 360, its games and the products to which it can connect – the episode clearly originated sometime close to the machine's heavily-promoted launch. Once the usual managerial oversights and acts of God (ie: sloppy contract workers) had transpired, the teams' finished displays successfully raised the eyebrows of both Allard and Steven Quinn, senior vice president of Wal-Mart, but not for the reasons intended. One sat perched on the verge of collapse, while the other cloaked itself in a black shroud in an effort to maximise its gaming zen.



Sound and vision

Synaesthesia rules as audiovisual artists get together to explore gaming

The Cybersonica 06 Conference, held at the Science Museum's Dana Centre in London, was an event dedicated to showcasing the latest developments in audiovisual fusion, and this year it provided an insight into what can happen when sound, art and technology combine. The answer, increasingly, is gameplay – although perhaps of a more open-ended nature than is commonly found on today's consoles and PCs.

Often borrowing the visual language and physical trappings of videogames, whether using joypads, aping platformers or utilising game engines, many of the works on display focused on the manipulation of sound and vision rather than creating a channelled gaming experience that would impose rules. Discussing this trend, **Anthony Rowe**, from interactive media designers Squidsoup, suggested that while they had chosen a game-like concept (in this case, a version of Carom) to lure people in, "If the point is to make music, you dilute it if you have gameplay-specific goals." He then added that, although his interface did not track player results, children who had tried it tended to keep score anyway. "It's like giving them a game, but not giving them the rules, so they make their own – I think there's a future in that."

Josh Randall, creative director at Harmonix, was also present to give a keynote speech and display *Guitar Hero II*. Enthusiastic about the other artworks, he explained his own company's commitment to using music and technology to create fully-fledged games. "There has to be something there that makes you want to come back, that grabs onto people and gives structure and goals and makes them feel good. A lot of the pieces here are purely for experimentation and some people just don't have the patience for that."


Harmonix' Josh Randall was on hand to demonstrate *Guitar Hero*'s charismatic plastic





Squidsoup's Soundtoys.net interface (top and above right) uses Havok physics to create a game of Carom. Each disk corresponds to an interactive artwork. The home for the conference was the Dana Centre (above left) – supported by the Science Museum and charitable trusts, it aims to promote science in new ways

However, Randall was also eager to explore a strong connection between *Guitar Hero* and the other works on display. "I think it comes from the same spirit as what's going on at Harmonix. They're thinking along the same lines we are, but going in all sorts of different directions."

Randall's warmly received keynote, Interactive Music For The Masses, reinforced Harmonix's commitment to helping non-musicians make music together. He also had time to look to the next generation of consoles, suggesting that the increasing focus on different input mechanisms such as Nintendo's Wii controller and Sony's EyeToy would create new possibilities for music games, while download services such as Xbox Live Arcade could provide a perfect platform for the delivery of open-ended sound toys.

"There has to be something there that makes you want to come back, that grabs onto people and gives structure and goals and makes them feel good"

Whether or not more technologically-minded artists choose to narrow their focus on games, Cybersonica offered a sideways opportunity to put cinema aside and compare videogames' artistic potential to a different – and perhaps more apt – model. With *Guitar Hero* and *Karaoke Revolution* continuing to sell well, and Q Entertainment's *Lumines* having both a sequel and online version announced at E3, there are promising signs that both the music and gaming communities are continuing to take each other seriously. Hopefully, the fruits of that collaboration will inspire genuinely new game ideas, as well as setting the agenda for future Cybersonicas.

OUT THERE



ROLLING FINISH

At Keita Takahashi's GDC presentation, scrolling through page after page of international *Katamari* cosplay photos and movies, he said simply: "This is game love." A group of dedicated fans showed their own game love this month in San Francisco, running the 12 kilometre Bay To Breakers marathon in full king- and princely garb, rolling their own hand-crafted cardboard katamari to the finish line in just under five hours. The LiveJournal of team leader Katie B chronicles the preparations and execution, illustrated with help from a well-stocked Flikr gallery, and recently updated with stats such the katamari's start and finish heights. "Oddly enough," she forewarns, "I still have enough cardboard to make a second."

- www.occlupanid.livejournal.com

HARDWARE

GP2X crosses over

After its faltering start, Gamepark Holdings' pint-sized Linux box launches in the UK with a new model and firmer wares

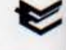
GP2X enthusiasts liberated by the machine's latest firmwares have already pieced together dozens of skins for its interface. And not before time, either. Online repositories of homebrew content are finally starting to swell with milestone builds, the demand for updates growing by the day. Those ARM CPU cores, furthermore, are encouragingly tolerant of being overclocked

The first edition of GP2X, the community-powered successor to Gamepark Holdings' popular GP32, had issues that were never going to be fixed with a mere update. But though its thumbstick remains stubborn and its face buttons too closely aligned, the handheld's Mk II iteration, released in the UK on May 18 at a price of £125, is a significant improvement both inside and out. Its thumbstick bias has been adjusted to better suit a user's natural grip, while a new LCD brings a brighter image, albeit with a narrowed viewing angle.

Better still, newly released version 2.0 firmware means that GP2X has finally got its head together. Having taken the time to fully understand and meet the requirements of the Linux GPL – an initial refusal to release source code for kernel and OS software sparked uproar among developers – Gamepark has addressed issues ranging from boot time (now 13 seconds, down from 40) to SD card interface stability and display fidelity. With the prospect of another false start all but removed, the development community is finally starting to demonstrate the enthusiasm that those formative months sorely lacked.

Promising recent software releases include several new and updated emulators, the most functional being a moderately compatible version of MAME, high-speed Mega Drive and Neo Geo emulators, and interpreters for engines such as SCUMM and the original Quake. The flow of games, both commercial and freeware, has also widened, though the high-profile examples such as *GTA* clone *Payback* are still understandably afflicted with makeshift appearance and poor performance. Several rough edges might still blight the GP2X experience overall, but its renewed charm looks sure to see it through.

Further information, together with links to distribution outlets, can be found at www.gp2x.co.uk



Continue

Giant crabs
Best to attack the weak spot, for massive damage

Rumble support
Can't we go forward without a step back?

Gamecube
Hang in there, little fella. Link may revive you yet

Quit

Enamel blues
Why limit the UK's DS Lite debut to just two colours?

360 piracy
Not even a region-freeing figleaf to hide behind

Burritos
The E3 diet starts to pall after the first half dozen



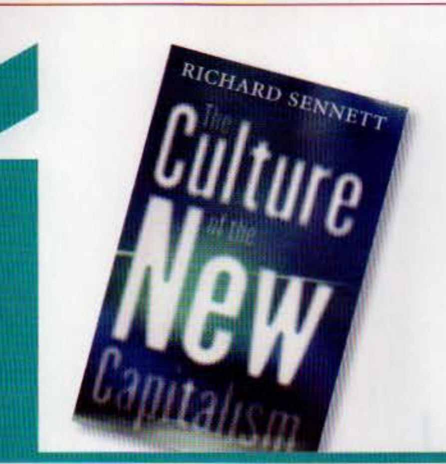
UNIT OPERATIONS

The latest attempt to square the entertainment value of games with their underlying philosophy

There are plenty of warning signs here. Subtitled An Approach to Videogames Criticism, literacy critic Bogost attempts to use such strategies when it comes to games, his self-confessed subject of professional interest. He's certainly chosen a ripe field, as there's been a glut of theorists outpouring their views on gaming recently.

But Bogost seems fatally stuck in Ph.D-land, with chunks of Heidegger, Leibnitz and Spinoza coughed up in chapter one. The following pages don't bring much respite either, as ancient Greek universality and nomalism are referenced, before Jacques Lacan's gap of the unconscious is unleashed. This wouldn't be so much of an issue if such erudition was bought to bear on the subject of computer games however, but you have to wait until a third of the way into the book to hit a confused discussion about game engines, genres and licensing before the book's nominal subject matter is actually raised.

And when the likes of Huizinga, Callois and Juul are incanted, there's little of substance that hasn't already been voiced about subjects such as the magic circle or the whole stale ludology versus narralogy debate. Bogost also gets overly waylaid by agent provocateur Gonzalo Frasca; most notably in the case of his archly-political *12th September* game. By the end, it's hard to muster much enthusiasm for this combination of opinions on philosophy and gaming.



THE CULTURE OF THE NEW CAPITALISM

An analysis of modern ideas that's anything but superficial

Labelled as one of Tony Blair's favourite sociologists thanks to research on employment, social inclusion and urban living, Richard Sennett's current bugbear is New Capitalism – and his book targets what he says is our more fluid, globally and informationally-based version of capitalism.

To some extent, Sennett sees positives that old bureaucractic forms, such as monopolistic companies and state infrastructure, have been relaxed allowing individuals to make their own way in the world. But he's also concerned with the lack of structure of such organisations, in terms of financial benefits such as pensions, as well as invisible ties such as interpersonal relationships and institutionalised knowledge.

Indeed, one key focus for Sennett is the western world's rejection of craftsmanship, something he defines as a task done well for its own sake, which has been replaced by consultants who have little attachment to the sweeping organisational changes they typically recommend. So far, so logical. Where he comes unstuck, however, is in the attempt to map cultural icons such as the iPod onto definitions like the 'MP3 institution', which Sennett defines as a company whose 'randomised shuffle feature' employs large numbers of workers on short-term contracts.

Despite occasional woolly thinking, there remains a strong logical thread in the book, with remarks about gaining a new order of power from an increasingly superficial culture especially thought provoking.

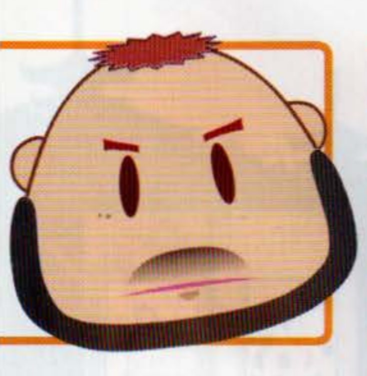






California grieving

Game producer Brick Bardo agonises over E3 from the comfort of his home



E3 is a nightmare, especially if you have a title to show. Having worked like hell to get your ROM ready for the flight out to LA, you make the journey, and only then do the frustrations really start piling up. You wait an age for immigration clearance at the airport, do the same at baggage reclamation and the taxi rank, and then you're injected into the stream of conferences, receptions and parties. All work, no fun. Last year's electrical failure was just the icing on the cake, and so this year, for the first time in many, I stayed at home. But I have to admit, in spite of everything I've just said, the thought of missing out was actually quite saddening. Much like the show itself.

As I followed the expo online, and via firsthand reports from colleagues on the show floor, I was astonished. The reaction to the two most anticipated events – the Sony and Nintendo conferences – was less a surprised 'ah' than a disappointed and worrisome 'what the...' Need I say that the main reason was PS3's pricing? A new hi-tech CPU, Blu-ray drive and set of manufacturing requirements has pushed Sony's machine out of the league of games consoles and into that of the general-purpose home computer. I already have one of those; I don't need another. While it's true that today's videogame market was made possible by the Family Computer – the Famicom – that isn't where its future lies. And after all its talk of offering a single, superior SKU to those of the competition, now Sony has unveiled a cheaper PS3, priced at a still shocking $499, but with key features such as the HDMI interface and wifi missing.

With this new hardware, Sony seems to have lost touch with the reality of the videogame industry. With its software, however, it's doing the opposite: trying to *achieve* reality where once, with PS2, it was happy to simply suggest it. For the development community, especially in Japan, things just keep getting worse. PS3 can deliver incredible graphics without need for our old rendering tricks, but many developers are still attached to those, and will need time to come to terms with all the power they've now been given. Looking at PS3's E3 demos, there were characters on screen with very un-lifelike, even bizarre bone structures. Animations often appeared unnatural, and while materials such as clothing are clearly better modelled, facial details such as skin have become uglier. Better results will certainly be achieved in time, but only by pouring resources into the manufacturing process rather than the design. In game development terms, that hardly seems efficient.

With this new hardware, Sony seems to have lost touch with the reality of the videogame industry. With its software, however, it's doing the opposite: trying to achieve reality where once, with PS2, it was happy to simply suggest it

Nintendo's conference, meanwhile, shed some light on its still quite mysterious console. One thing that's been made clear is that, in terms of power, the Wii isn't competing against Xbox 360 or PS3. Price-wise, however, it's cheaper than both. As usual, the company's first and foremost concern is designing an innovative games machine, with both

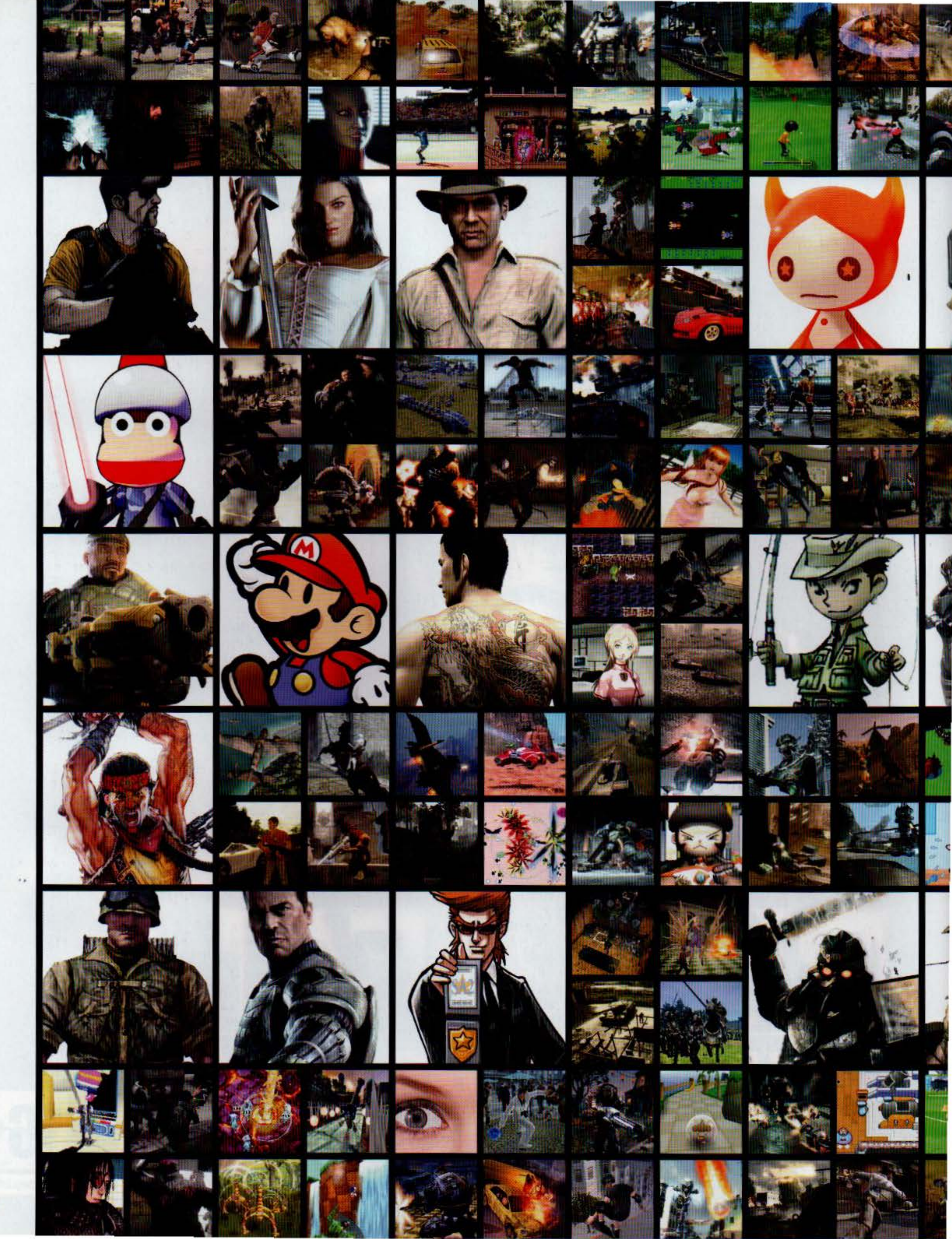


Assumption regarding the consumer tastes are always risky, as reaction to this year's E3 has shown. The pricing of PS3 has shaken Japanese loyalty to the PlayStation brand, while Nintendo is still working to gain universal acceptance of its console's new name. As ever, the massmarket consumer will have the final say

the Nunchuk controller and the overall concept holding great promise. But that name… surely, that name can't be final.

You just can't call a console 'Wii'. It's ridiculous. I really think that if the Virtual Console is one of the main features, allowing players to enjoy a library of games from throughout Nintendo's history, then the machine's name should somehow reflect it. How about calling it 'Ultra Famicom' instead? You can't tell me that's any worse.

But then neither could you have convinced me, prior to this year's E3, that the event would have ended with Microsoft coming out on top – at least in terms of being the mainstream platform for gamers around the world. Well, outside Japan, at least. But up against the incredibly over-expensive PlayStation3, and the ridiculously named Wii, that was the only conclusion I could draw.







THE GAMES OF E3





GEARS OF WAR

Gears' blindingly overexposed street warfare proved the 360's graphical high-water mark this E3, but those visuals only hint at the game's heavy gravity. Every too-slow, too-visible dash, every grunt of effort as you vault cover, conveys an almost exhausting weight – that excessive body armour could be protection from atmospheric pressure as much as high-velocity impact.

And naturally, there's plenty of impact. Few titles offer weapons so deafening to shoot, or devastating to be shot at with, as even the standard assault rifle – complete with a representatively full-on chainsaw bayonet – proves. It's not subtle, but neither is it mindless:

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **EPIC**

since movement and peripheral awareness must be surrendered when shouldering a weapon or taking cover, firefights attain a near-realistic disdain for reckless play.

In creating a truly console-aware title, Epic has bolted complexity and strategy on to its typical output – either an unconscious irony or a deliberate two-finger salute. And consequently, you may find it difficult to stifle a whoop or two.











HEAVENLY SWORD

Besides honeyed light and beautiful violence, what remains in the mind after *Heavenly Sword*'s press presentation are ancient bazookas and sacred genitals. Only the first is an in-game pickup (barring a savage comeuppance of Andy Serkis' crazed tyrant), but both describe the game's unexpectedly surreal atmosphere.

Serkis – the man behind Gollum and Kong – has joined the team as actor and contributing director, hopefully ensuring the script flows as memorably as his ad-libbed anatomical tirade. Down on the show floor, a playable arena battle ably communicated the game's contrast of weightless grace and pulverising force – often in the same movement. Currently bare of UI, keeping eyes on Nariko's lethal choreography is a game in itself. It's dazzlingly pure, so much that when button prompts barge on-screen for a QTE finale, they're a jarring reminder that you're playing a videogame. Which is surely a compliment as much as a complaint.

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **NINJA THEORY**

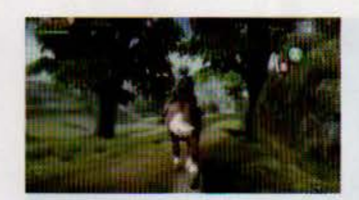




ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS

There was a question for *Zelda* to answer at E3, and the answer is in the top right-hand corner of the screenshots. The question was if the delay to the GameCube version, a system already on the brink of starvation, would be compensated for by the Wii arriving ready-equipped with a classic. But, while there's no faulting the degree of Wii integration – use the Remote to pick targets for your boomerang, shield bash with the Nunchuck, draw one back past the other to taunten your bow string – at the moment the result is to distance you from Link's world as you wrestle with the hybrid controls. Miyamoto is adamant that an hour or two (or longer for gamers handicapped by their familiarity with the old controls) is enough to let light dawn: for now it seems more likely that *Twilight* remains a GameCube title at heart, and the Wii will have to look elsewhere for its first defining title.

FORMAT: **GAMECUBE, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**









LOST PLANET



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

One of the smartest and best-coordinated moves this E3, Microsoft's release of the *Lost Planet* demo over Xbox Live Arcade was the second most downloaded piece of content of the reported five million served over the week of the expo, falling predictably just one behind the *Halo 3* teaser video.

Even for weary show attendees, though, the chance for extended travel through Capcom's snowblind tundra outside the storm and stress of the show floor was much appreciated, and *Lost Planet* continues to shape up nicely as a uniquely eastern take on the shooter, albeit one rooted in and inspired by western culture.

GENJI 2

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEI**
DEVELOPER: **GAME REPUBLIC**

Destined to be remembered for is lacklustre showing at the Sony press conference, even on closer inspection it's easy to be underwhelmed by *Genji 2*, which comes hot on the heels of one of the more spectacular late-generation PS2 titles. And that small gap in time is echoed by the small differential in the impact of the sequel compared to that of the original. Which isn't to say it fails the tick the next-gen boxes: its character models ripple with detail, flame effects explode with the enthusiasm that new hardware brings and the screen is busy with enemies. Nor has it rested on its laurels. Two new characters join the line-up and it will now be possible to hot-swap between characters, producing a momentary freeze in the action as the new model is loaded in and allowing improvised cross-character combos. But even across the extended battle plains – this time round the fight will even take Yoshitsune out to sea – the stilted transitions between animations and familiarity of the backdrops make this feel very much a sister piece to the original rather than a reinvention.









CRYSIS

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRYTEK**

No FPS has exerted such authority over the eyes as this. Its AI might be rough, as you'd expect of a game due next year, but its world – a diverse system of animation and interaction – is overwhelming. If you recall Cevat Yerli's emphasis on 'videorealism' rather than photorealism in **E**161, then you'll understand why screenshots can't do *Crysis* justice. To appreciate the impact of the game's invention, delivered in bulk with every passing second, you simply have to see it in motion.

No one event feels isolated in the playable jungle level: each action, whether it's shearing a treetop on to a passing head, igniting a fuel tank or simply pressing through dense foliage, triggers enough chains of cause and effect to last well into the next, creating a sea of visual activity that ebbs and flows. Confirmed as a PC exclusive, it's also making the most of the mouse/keyboard interface, with on-the-spot weapon configuration binding a feast of pop-up menu options to the gun itself.







SUPER MARIO GALAXY

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

Put simply, it feels just like it should. From any new Mario game you expect excellence; from any new Mario game for a new system you expect a defining title. But for a new Mario game for the Wii you expect something you've never experienced before.

Much of *Galaxy* is conventional, which is suprising. More suprising is how much of that conventionality resides in the control scheme: analogue stick for movement, a button for jump, and land on an enemy's head for a victory. But the space setting means there are no longer any levels, with dinky planets dotting paths out into the darkness like a breadcrumb trail. Where the Wii makes Mario its own is by giving you an extra hand – the Remote controlling a pointer which lets you grasp or tickle anything you fancy, Which means, in effect, you're suddenly controlling two characters at once. Why run Mario towards something when you can pull it towards him? The combination of the low-gravity worlds and instant access pointer makes *Galaxy* an irresistably greedy game: you want it, you grab it, you see it, you go there. Which, put simply, feels just like it should.





TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX VEGAS

The Tom Clancy franchise has become such a swap-shop of features that it's beginning to feel like its constituent series now struggle to maintain separate identities. *Rainbow Six* continues to place unique emphasis on characterisation, but like *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* it's blessed its environment with far greater personality than its people. Alternating between first- and thirdperson viewpoints, with dumbed-down combat and simplified team controls, *Vegas* is just down the road from where *Warfighter* ended up.

But while last year's E3 offered a mocked-up postcard of Mexico City, this time we were shown something real: a game on a much steadier path to completion before the year's end. A shader frenzy of neon, glass, fire and water, its hectic assault run over the Strip (by helicopter, of course), on to a rooftop, over the side and through the windows of a high-rise casino was as fierce a demonstration of next-gen imagination as *GR:AW*'s, but with the reassurance of a connected 360 devkit. Hopefully, future previews will find it to be more than a mere flash in the pan, even if that flash was one of the brightest of E3.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (MONTREAL)**





MOTORSTORM

What a difference a demo makes. After its showings raised the eyebrows at last year's E3 and this year's GDC, *Motorstorm* was finally hands-on, ready to stand on its own merits. And, despite the attention focused on the graphical grunt which goes into modelling each individual rivet, and the processing power which models each inch of churned-up mud, the thing which marks out *Motorstorm* as a truly next-gen title is its ambition to make sure the game experience is continually evolving. The bruising mix of seven vehicle types on the shingle, sludge and outcrops of the Monument Valley means that other players (and even the AI) will be focused on forcing you onto the terrain that suits your set-up least, and adapting their tactics as their own wheels break down ramps and gouge out ruts that turn the track into one long cattle-grid.

The races are set against the backdrop of the Motorstorm, an impromptu festival of speed and dirt which echoes round the canyon walls. But while it's clear the mechanics are geared for entertainment, there's some worry that the handling isn't as rewarding. Rumble is also sorely missed, and it's not clear if the motion sensitive options Evolution is considering (perhaps to steer, perhaps to sideways shunt) will compensate.

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **EVOLUTION**



GANGS OF LONDON



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEA**
DEVELOPER: **SCEE LONDON**

A concerted effort to distance its design from that of *The Getaway* would have made *Gangs Of London*'s abridged title more explicable. But with its scope widened to incorporate the baggage of a boilerplate PSP adaptation – ill-conceived minigames and minimalist multiplayer mode included – this feels a more characteristic *Getaway* than any of others. Its direction now seems lost amid the capital's web of streets, which have, inevitably, been crammed on to UMD with muddier visual detail than the PS2 could afford. The so-called graphic novel style has inspired little change beyond Comic Sans pop-up tips, though it'll no doubt provide a neat excuse for reducing cutscenes to static panels, freeing up the time needed to model yet more vehicle indicators and accurately placed traffic lights.

HAZE



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **FREE RADICAL**

There's a problem with being a free-thinking game studio: your ideas become your most valuable possession. Where other teams can show of their tech or their pricey IPs, confident of not being copied, Free Radical has had to keep the key idea at the heart of *Haze* secret for now. It's a shame, because without it, the game appears another entry in what's rapidly become a standard genre: jungle-based, squad-based FPS. A smart reticule-based command system should smooth out the process of commanding your fellow soldiers, and hints of a major plot twist – is your mind being controlled, is everything a lie, is the fight even happening? – should enliven both the by-the-book story and the apparently by-the-numbers action.

WARIOWARE: SMOOTH MOVES

Scribbling, swinging, slicing, panicking, yelling and flailing – *Smooth Moves* makes physical the effect that the first *WarioWare* had on the player's brain. And let's not forget about the puffing and panting: its unrelenting pace and demanding reaction times should make it into one of the most exhausting party pieces around, from squats to sprints to having a bit of a sit-down to catch your breath.

With the game demanding a greater variety of approaches and responses than any previous



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

WarioWare – and taking in some 200 microgames – it'll be the ultimate test of Nintendo's ability to implement intuitive design. Will the correct action be as instantly obvious as it's always been? Nintendo has decided that the traditional one-word prompt isn't enough guidance, with each game being prefaced by a posture that the player should assume, such as 'The Handlebar' (clutch controller sideways in both hands) and 'The Waiter' (controller lying flat on palm), and it will hopefully prove that these become second nature very rapidly. And, of course, such a concern will likely melt away when confronted with the chance to pop a granny's false teeth back into place with a thrust of the elbow.



AGE OF CONAN: HYBORIAN ADVENTURES

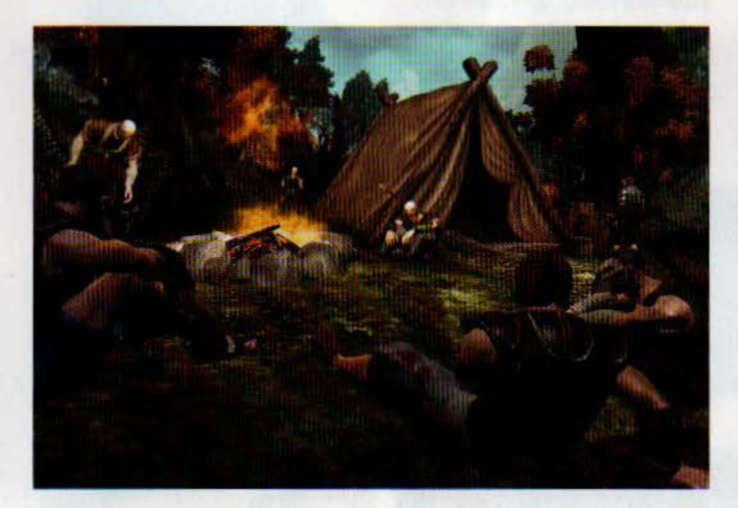
Hyboria strikes us as a world with 40 words to express 'vast' and none at all for 'small', so we don't envy director **Gaute Godager**'s task of a whistle-stop tour. He hurries through character generation, a comprehensive affair of weathering out any beauty: a scowling mouth, a heavy brow, a broken nose: "A typical British football hooligan for you," he grins.

Next, a 20-level solo adventure forges your character's legend and scars their body: the realtime combat system is merciless, since a chain-kill bonus rewards what Godager describes as "driving your enemies before you". Later, cantering over lush moorland on a motion-captured steed, he demonstrates couched lances and scything sword-cuts with similar primal relish.

But where other MMOs peak at the endgame, *Age Of Conan* begins. Your bloody rise to power is a proving ground of guilds, armies and rivalries, of raising and pillaging settlements – but that's a tale too long for E3's short attention span.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **FUNCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**









SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

A nother Sonic, another new character, this time in the shape of Silver, whose telekinetic abilities turn this blisteringly fast, pristinely beautiful playground into something a little reminiscent of *Psi-Ops*. It isn't what you expected, although much of the rest of the game might well be.

The high-definition graphics – although not demonstrating the clear blue water between PS3 and 360 that Sony would like them to – give the speed that you've become accustomed to from Sonic a real sense of physical threat. The towers that crumble and spikes that explode from floor-tiles now have a dense solidity, even when you're screaming past them almost too fast to see. The conventional speed-based runs, taking you up waterfalls and along walkways, will as likely see you running on a vertical path as a horizontal one, and are enormously exhilarating. What doesn't feel so modern, however, is the way these unpredictable levels tend to play: a crunch of trial and error as you learn the best routes and memorise the pitfalls. But where these sections do

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

at least promise fluid, spectacular play, Silver's urban dystopia is less convincing. His ability to manipulate rubble and crates to form missiles and impromptu bridges feels clumsy, and will need fair bit of work if he's not to stop *Sonic's* flow.



DEAD RISING



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

Capcom's Romero-cribbed romp proved popular on the show floor, attracting curious onlookers behind players, with each zombie-halving by way of oversized shears and bloody park-bench side-swipe drawing an exuberant mix of cheers and groans from the audience. Oblivious players equipped with headphones could also be spied helplessly jumping and screaming with each zombie attack, making it clear that *Dead Rising* is shaping up quite nicely as a crowd-pleasing crowd-killer, with its zombie hordes being perhaps the most straightforward use of next-gen power to simply bring more enemies on-screen at once. But although other titles are now doing the same, this still feels like its leading the pack, not least because its subject matter means it doesn't have to worry about fluid animation.

MASS EFFECT

It's hard to blame BioWare for its pride in the storytelling technique of its sci-fi RPG: its characters convey a remarkable amount of emotional subtlety, faces studying each other with almost imperceptible movements of the eyes. Yet it's hard not to wonder how well its new dialogue system – a quick-access wheel of responses, from kind to threatening, designed to speed your choice of reply – will engage the player in the process.

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**

Played over hundreds of freely-explorable worlds, with more to arrive via Live, BioWare fans will no doubt be at home with its pausable realtime battles, now enhanced with tactical movement commands for NPCs in your party.



PROJECT HAMMER



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

A nunchuck, and now a hammer – Nintendo's cathartic combat title completes Wii's transformation into a weapon. Movement is handled with the former, while the main controller is wielded as a bludgeon in a literal game of *Smash Bros.* Little more is known about *Hammer*, but it remains a significant title for Wii. Partly because it spearheads a clear decision by Nintendo to provide more mature games for the platform itself – perhaps pre-empting concerns about whether or not third-parties will step in in sufficient numbers to fill that breach. And partly because the very physical nature of the combat represents one of the main concerns about the console: it seems fair enough for a tennis game to tire you out, but will *Hammer* tax your wrists more than a conventional videogame should?



ASSASSIN'S CREED

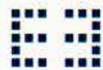
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**





Despite featuring one of the best realised human heroes of the show, *Assassin's Creed* doesn't treat its star like a person. "You control him like a puppet," demonstrates director **Patrice Désilets**, showing how each face button controls a different aspect of his body (hands, head, feet), modified by whether you want that body part to take direct or covert action. The nature of that action is controlled by context, bowing your head if you're trying to blend in to a crowd of monks, shoving a passer-by out the way as you make your escape after a kill. It's a sign that this is as daringly inventive as the team's first game (*Prince Of Persia: Sands Of Time*), and that initial concerns about the *GTA*-inspired structure of this mix of careful politics and carefree exploration – anything that sticks out more than two inches climbed – may be entirely misplaced.





EVERY EXTEND EXTRA



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **BUENA VISTA**
DEVELOPER: **Q ENTERTAINMENT**

Doubts raised by a dry downloadable demo were quieted once you sit down with the full display version of Q's re-working of Omega's freeware original. The ubiquitous and deafening show-floor noise may have muffled any appreciation where it counts the most – in its newfound integration with house tracks – but, for all its familiar mechanical simplicity, it remains no less dazzling a light show played out over a rainbow spectrum of vector and particle effects unique to each level. And it's hard to beat become yet another bullet amongst the smartly designed bullet hell 'Digi-medu' bosses who await their indirect destruction

STALKER: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

A familiar friend from previous E3s, this year *Stalker* was tucked away in THQ's meeting room, perhaps a little abashed by its eternally delayed status. The expectation, then, is of a disaster, but *Stalker* is looking in remarkably solid shape. This is perhaps explained by THQ's decision to ship one of their own producers over to Ukraine to monitor the project's progress, with the proviso that he can't come home until the game is finished: how's that for an incentive? And so *Stalker* looks every inch the competent FPS. The ten by thirty kilometre area depicted still raises goosebumps with the cold blue of its sky and the mouldy whites of its deserted buildings; the straightforward gun-play benefits from a day-night cycle which substantially effects the local, often hostile wildlife; and the need to stay aware of how much noise and light you are producing means that stealth play isn't simply a matter of playing patience. But, perhaps inevitably, to get these basics in place, much of the original amition, particularly in the RPG elements has been pared back.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **GSC GAME WORLD**



GOD OF WAR 2

"We're really pushing for a family rating this time," muses game director **Cory Barlog** as the God of War unseats, dismembers, and cleaves a cyclopean rider's skull in quick succession, "When we get Kratos in *Kingdom Hearts*, at that point we've made it."

GOW2 has a simple pitch: take the original's gladiatorial spectacle and extravagant set design, then do it bigger and better. With the engine in place, the artists have usurped the throne – Barlog was the first game's lead animator, and producer **Steve Caterson** its art director – and the camera pans with satisfaction over its levels. Puzzle and level design benefits from experience and feedback, making a reprise of the pillars of Hades mercifully unlikely.

But for all *GOW2*'s overhauls, its lead remains unrepentant: "Kratos will interact with a wider variety of mythological figures this time," Caterson claims, and asking if by that he means 'kill' is answered with a wide, what-can-you-do shrug.

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEA**
DEVELOPER: **SONY SANTA MONICA**











STARFOX DS

Though Fox McCloud's last two adventures have managed to veer the series slightly off its original charted course, back in the hands of its original developer, now at upstart company Q-games, his portable return looks very well poised to recapture precisely the spirit that earned the game its initial renown.

Thankfully more than a simple port, *StarFox DS'* major addition is an underlying turn-based strategy-lite routine replacing the original's branched paths. Using the touchscreen to create flightplans and routes of attack (under the cover of fog of war at higher difficulties), interceptions with enemy forces will kick off the familiar flying sequences, free of former on-rails restrictions, and manoeuvrable by unexpectedly accessible stylus control, leaving all face and shoulder buttons available for firing.

Although we were only able to get hands-on time with the game's singleplayer missions, the addition of fourplayer Arwing dogfights over wifi should nicely round-off McCloud's long-overdue return to his roots.

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **Q-GAMES/NINTENDO**





SHADOWRUN

Shadowrun is an experimental team-based shooter with a big problem: nobody wanted *Shadowrun* to be a team-based shooter. Based on the much-loved pen-and-paper RPG which depicted the cataclysm that occurs when magic is returned to a near-future Earth, this was one of the rare licenses that had gamers swooning rather than shrugging. But the long-gestating project's emergence as a cyberpunk *Counter-Strike* predictably raised hackles, and its developers spent the show wilfully misinterpreting somewhat hostile questions over their oblique use of the licence.

But while many loyalists are inconsolable, the real sore point isn't just that the licence stands to gain little from the game, but that the game's flourishes of invention may be lost in the backlash. Personal gliders and teleport bursts (including those that propel you through walls, floors and ceilings) introduce the jump-dash-jump play more usually expected of a Japanese platformer, and subtle, intelligent balancing governs both magical and mundane actions.

However, such forward-thinking mechanics are concealed by blocky level design and tired objectives that seem to ignore both next- and previous-generation advances – *Shadowrun*'s uphill battle for acceptance will, aptly, need all the magic it can get.

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **FASA**



SONIC WILDFIRE



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

It's fair to say that many old-school Sonic fans have taken to approaching new titles with a nervous wince, but here there's only need for a relieved grin. Offering almost total purity, *Wildfire* trades depth for speed, setting Sonic (and Sonic alone) running on a set course through deceptively open levels, while you tilt the Remote (held handle-bar style) to direct him on his way. The physical sensation is not all that far removed from the bonus stages in *Sonic Rush*, which had you dragging Sonic from left to right as he barrelled down bob-sled runs. Jumping is handled with a button, and attacks and double-jumps – which can be gratifyingly chained – with a brisk shake of the Remote. There seems to be every reason to believe that that relieved grin will last the distance.



ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS

E3's competitive atmosphere is kind to id games, and *Quake Wars* proves no exception. Packing a show-friendly skirmish into 20 minutes (not to downplay the vast strategic depths that Splash Damage spokespeople excitedly describe), its hot seats never cooled during the show.

Tight map design and an eye for multiplayer game flow sets the front line a step away from wherever you are, providing a level of ambient teamwork should co-ordination fail. For that failure, we blame respawn shellshock, the sky constantly thundering with Strogg orbital drops and GDF parachutes. As with any great multiplayer title, the accidents are as memorable as the design: parachuting onto an unexpected passing Strogg flyer, or holding an objective with a crippled tank locked in a drunken figure-of-eight.

Even knowing what to expect, it overruns expectation, leaving ears ringing and minds racing with possibilities: our only doubt is that Splash Damage can bear to stop working on its labour of love long enough to actually release it.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **SPLASH DAMAGE/ID**

SUPER MONKEY BALL: BANANA BLITZ

Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz ought to be the ultimate Wii title – the most encouraging indication that companies other than Nintendo will be able to get the most out of motion sensing. But when you come to play it, it's impossible not to be a little underwhelmed. It's not that the sense of connection isn't there: the relationship between the tilting ground and the controller (the Wii Remote, held between both hands) is perfectly calibrated, and the immediacy and accessibility of the game are exactly what Nintendo was hoping to create. But *Super Monkey Ball*, with its one-stick gameplay and dastardly simplicity, is probably the only game which had already managed to nail those traits through software design alone. *Banana Blitz* only doesn't amaze because the original already has.

And those earlier iterations also provide the real warning light: this is a game which lives and dies on its level design, and there wasn't enough on show at E3 to gauge if it's returned to its simple roots, or revisits the gimmicky frustrations of the second game. What is clear is that where some of the minigames – notably Monkey Target – transfer effortlessly to the Wii, other new additions feel a little strained: the race which has you pumping both controllers in time with your character's legs wears thin particularly fast.

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**





KILLZONE: LIBERATION



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **GUERILLA**

As if to atone for the big-screen controversy of last year's Sony press conference, the handheld *Killzone* – an almost immediate sequel to the PS2 original – champions technical achievability over ambition. Its high-altitude thirdperson camera keeps its visual demands in check, its framerate smooth and its new focus on tactical combat sharp. As a second-generation PSP title, it's reassuring. The art style that earned the series a future has been capably retained, though the pandemonium it once illustrated has mellowed for the sake of small-screen coherence, with an automatic lock-on and AI teammate offering thinking time. But though its vehicle combat adds dashes of variety, will that downward stare ultimately shrink its horizons?



300: MARCH TO GLORY



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **COLLISION**

Set to accompany the 2007 film adaptation of Frank Miller's Battle of Thermopylae retelling, small LA developer Collision made a similarly brave stand at E3 by choosing to present a barely more than proof-of-concept build of its thirdperson meleé title. Already striking with its hazy amber bloom and the brilliant red of the Spartans' cloaks, there's promising, if currently loosely implemented, ideas here. Free meleé sections require both sword and shield or spear use, and aim to remain grounded in brutal reality, while phalanx sections are almost militaristic rhythm-action, tempering the relentless advance with quick defensive tactics.

YOSHI'S ISLAND 2

No menus and no maps occupy the lower half of the handheld's real estate for this revisit of a classic: instead just a pure double-height helping of scribbly platforming was on display for the first truly new chapter of the Yoshi storybook in over a decade. Though in essence functionally identical to the SNES original – the control scheme seems the same, rather than relying on the touchscreen – this time around stork switches will give Yoshi the chance to hot-swap his passengers from the infant Mario, who provides a stomp ability, to the baby Peach, whose parasol can catch updrafts to lift the duo to new ground.



There was a deafening collective sucking-in of breath when it was revealed that Artoon, who previously failed to do the Yoshi franchise justice with their clumsy *Universal Gravitation*, will be developing the sequel, but there are reasons to be hopeful. Given an established set of graphic assets to work with and a proven mechanical framework already in place, the studio's knack for prioritising ambitious ideas over adequate execution should be held in check. And, after allowing a rare blot to be added to Mario's platforming copy book, it's likely that Nintendo will holding the reins rather tighter than it did last time round, especially since *Yoshi's Island 2* won't be able to hide behind the novelty of a motion sensitive control scheme.

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **ARTOON/NINTENDO**



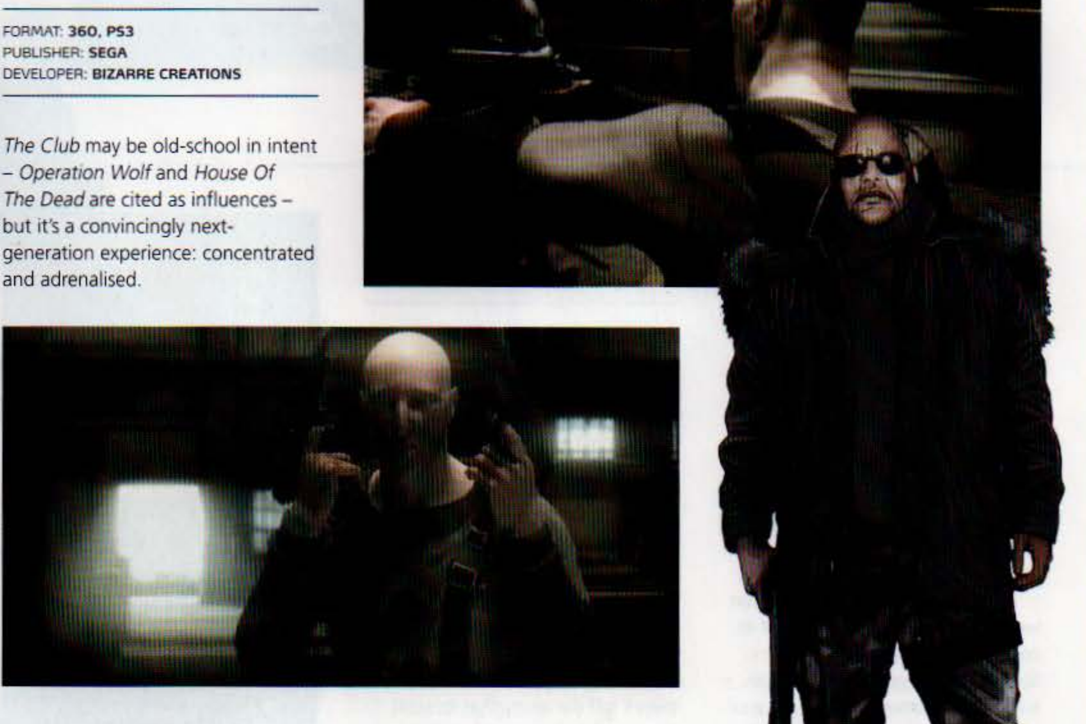
THE CLUB

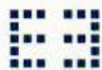
A few minutes into the demo level – that's at least halfway through, such is the pacing – we realise Bizarre has blazed the racing stripe through the shooter genre that we'd initially expected from Criterion's *Black*. A breathless score attack that offsets its grim bloodsport premise with note-perfect arcade cues, *The Club* demands forgetting all shooter conventions beyond Always Run.

Refraining from directly keeping its promise of death should you stop moving (an extreme difficulty setting, perhaps?) the threat of lost score, never mind lost health, hangs over any pause longer than that needed to steady your aim. The current build's rhythmically jolting camera and pounding inner-ear-pressure soundtrack produce the sensation of an on-foot racer, and Bizarre reveals a briefly implemented injury system was dropped for flagging the pace.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE CREATIONS**

The Club may be old-school in intent – *Operation Wolf* and *House Of The Dead* are cited as influences – but it's a convincingly next-generation experience: concentrated and adrenalised.





SPORE

It's a game about numbers brought to life, be they the inspirational Powers of Ten, the generative equations that create all content from modelling and texturing to behaviour, or the incomprehensible vastness of its universe, and it's impossible to come away from a demonstration without feeling dwarfed by its ambition and scope.

This year's most exciting addition was the continued refinement of its community aspect, namely the Sporepedia, a hyperlinked deck of trading cards covering every piece of user-made content in your universe, currently set to become the basis of its cross-platform development.

Despite its accessibility and non-threatening charm (except where intended), the question remains whether it will have the same impact as *The Sims*. Though it promises to adapt itself to your aggression or pacifism and populate new worlds based on your past preferences, there's still the worry that its sci-fi roots might alienate the masses.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **MAXIS/EA**



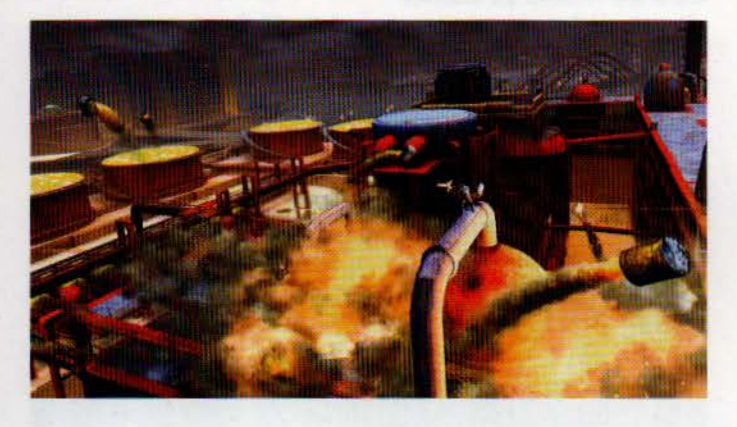


CRACKDOWN

Carjacking turns to car-throwing in this free-roaming action game, but it's for a relatively good cause. *Crackdown* charges players with cleaning up the unlawful urban indulgence that is *GTA*'s legacy, asking them to purge the sandbox of criminals instead of just becoming one. Running, gunning and driving are expanded to include giant leaps and the agility to make use of the city far above ground, the power to wield props (from dustbins to bystanders) once the ammo runs dry and a persistent environment that means a bespoke barricade will be there to stay. Co-op Live play is welcome, but there are no details yet on how the player is going to while away their downtime outside of the action. The inclusion of over 100 licensed music tracks may be a mistake, a generic gesture that could detract from the game's fantastical styling, where thick, bright colours give clarity and horizon-deep definition to the dark cityscape.

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **REAL TIME WORLDS**









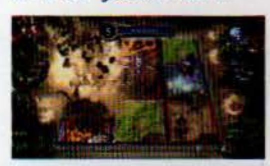
EXCITE TRUCK



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

Though it may seem a drab-looking choice for a firstparty production, just remember: Nintendo knows its arcade racers. *Excite Truck* offers the exaggerated dips, ramps and supernatural airtime of an ATV game, minus the need to fiddle with preloading and throttle timing. The main Wii controller is held sideways as a mixture of joypad and steering wheel, staging an entire game around handlebar syndrome, while your vehicle can be tilted as it travels through the air. Landing it perfectly parallel to the ground earns instant turbo boosts, and being able to gracefully chain these spurts a la *Burnout* will be the key to a satisfying victory. Only a longer playtest will be able to show whether the controller calibration strikes the balance between frustrating delicacy and rewarding precision.

EYE OF JUDGMENT



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

The first EyeToy game to look away from the human body and instead focus on new modes of play, Sony Japan's *Eye Of Judgment* also seems poised to cast its gaze toward the expanded marketing tactics promised at Sony's GDC keynote.

Played on a 3x3 grid under the careful watch of an arm-mounted camera, players both online and off will fight card-based element-fortified strategy battles to occupy five of the nine available slots, with all interactions rendered in realtime on the screen.

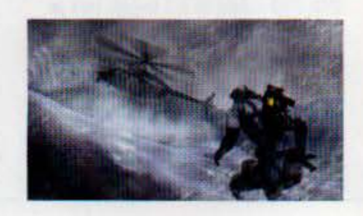
The game will launch with over 100 creatures and spell cards, with more due to be distributed in following months, though it's still undecided whether the aim is for collectible packs or identical kits. The question remains exactly where in the house we'll play it, though.

SPLINTER CELL: DOUBLE AGENT

It has taken four games for Sam Fisher to defect to the action hero archetype of turning turncoat, of working with the bad guys for the greater good. Or not, in *Double Agent*'s case – players now have the choice of taking Fisher's ambivalent status in their own preferred direction, betraying the NSA or upholding their objectives. The game sees Fisher entering fully-fledged war zones as part of his campaign, and the solidity and flexibility of stealth action doesn't seem to have wavered. What's most interesting, however, is the possibility of Fisher becoming the quarry of subsequent Splinter Cell agents, perhaps bringing some of *Chaos Theory*'s excellently tense and complex multiplayer details to solo play.

FORMAT: **360, GC, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**









Wii SPORTS

The demo at the Nintendo press conference had, it seemed, left every single E3 attendee hungry for a quick game of *Tennis*, and few who made it to the front of the queue were disappointed with what they found. Played only with the Remote, and controlling only the raquet swing, not character movement, the game works on pure, plain instinct. There is simply no need to think, just play – everything Nintendo promised. What that also means is that it seems very, very simple. However, the subtleties offered by the Remote – twist slightly as you swing to add spin – may hide tactical depths. The same is true of the other games included in Wii Sports – currently *Baseball* and *Golf*, with *Airplane* and other titles possibly added later – which, combined with a likely budget price, will make this most players' first, and defining, Wii experience.

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



SUPREME COMMANDER



FORMAT: **PC**
DEVELOPER: **GAS POWERED GAMES**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**

An RTS from the makers of *Total Annihilation, Supreme Commander's* engine gives players the ultimate sniper rifle: the ability to zoom the field of view from an all-encompassing overview – a map plastered with abstract red and blue icons – right down to the chaos of local skirmishes. It's a system that offers a level of detail and busyness that, when viewed from the right height, could well be mistaken for a tussle between two technologically-advanced ant farms. It's still got one eye on hardware as much as software, though, since it supports dual screens, allowing for a custom pair of perspectives on the battle.



JUST CAUSE

When we previewed *Just Cause* last year, it seemed destined to be one of those games that breaks your heart. There was no way that lush vegetation and tropical bloom would make the transition from high-tech demo to actual game, no way the promised blockbuster moves – skydiving from burning planes, parachuting from speeding car to runaway truck – would arrive undiluted in playable form. But faced with the 360 version, everything is in place. Rico Rodriguez remains an irresistably roguish hero, and his methods are as extravant as you could wish for. Give him an assassination mission and rather driving meekly (and time-consumingly – the game covers 250,000 acres) to his target he's as likely to hi-jack a truck, parachute to a roadster, drive to an airfield, steal a plane, wingwalk, sky-dive towards his target's convoy of minions (rocket-launching one into smithereens on his way down), land one car behind his victim and hi-jack that, by which stage the man he's supposed to kill is so terrifyied he's bailed out of his moving vehicle and is running for the bushes. Feeling genuinely adaptable to player improvisation, *Just Cause* still has to prove it has mission design strong enough to bolster its quick-thrills playground, but in terms of the latter it seems primed to deliver on all its promises.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **AVALANCHE STUDIOS**





WARHAWK

It's easy to feel a little sorry for *Warhawk*. It's sudden status change to motion-sensing poster-boy meant that most E3-goers were only interested in it for one thing. And in that one thing it acquitted itself well: the adjustment to controlling the craft by movement alone is a very quick one, and there was no doubting the accuracy with which the PS3 can detect the movement and attitude of the pad. It would make for a most tranquil of game experiences if it wasn't for the neon ordnance studding the sky. It's a significant shift, not just for PS3 but for games of this type, which have long been dogged with forbiddingly complex control systems, which alienate many who haven't grown up with them. As proof of validity of Sony's decision, it's less convincing. It's clear that movement control is a neat fit here; the idea of other teams re-examining their control systems some distance into the development process is more unsettling.

But *Warhawk* has more to give, not least its in terms of its on-foot sections, which take the scale of battle all the way from the skies to the canyons. Even without the controller news, this would still be a key PlayStation 3 title.

FORMAT: **PS3**
DEVELOPER: **INCOGNITO**
PUBLISHER: **SONY**





BLUE DRAGON

Whether a case of worryingly delayed development for a game meant to launch this Christmas, or instead Microsoft playing its cards tight to its chest in anticipation of a larger TGS showcase (this is, after all, Mistwalker's sonnet to woo Japanese gamers to the console), the behind-closed-doors showing of *Blue Dragon* revealed a game every bit as striking as earlier looks would have you believe, but just as strikingly incomplete.

Split into sections to show off dialogue sequences and overworld navigation, conspicuously absent from the demo was anything more than cursory interaction with its soft-shaded world. Apart from a battle lead-in animation, no combat details were shown, including any hint of its shadow-creature mechanics, and for all its procedural beauty, the game's world was entirely empty save for the lone playable character, leaving the jury still firmly out.

FORMAT: **360**
DEVELOPER: **MISTWALKER/ARTOON**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**







YAKUZA



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

The westernised *Ryu Ga Gotoku* enjoyed a prominent showing in both Sega and Sony's booths, indicating that though it's not as easy a sell as 'the Asian *GTA*' or '*Shenmue* with gangsters', it's still seen as a premiere title. The rollicking streetfights needed little translation, and early game text seems intact, including the random snatches of conversation from Kamuro-cho's passers-by.

Production is still underway on the English vocal dub, but we're assured that Sega intends to strive for the original dialogue's quality and strength of delivery – including a heavy-duty voice cast to match. However, the high quantity of dialogue means there's little hope of having both Japanese and English soundtracks on the same disc.

HELLGATE: LONDON

Call it *Diablo 20K* – with each showing, *Hellgate* becomes a more direct spiritual successor, and its stand drew a steady pilgrimage of Blizzard shirts to match. Flagship hasn't simply transferred its legacy, but built on it: stripping downtime with quick recall options, addressing the patchwork of mixed armour pieces with selectable dominant styles, further streamlining the classic interface.

Across the game's systems, an overall structure of randomisation studded with prebuilt content is

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **FLAGSHIP**

taking shape. Travel between Underground station havens thread through fixed landmarks and randomised backways – rail lines, devastated suburbs, the dry bed of the Thames – while plot-driving quests share space with chance encounters and optional supply-and-demand tasks that are inspired, however distantly, by *Animal Crossing*.

Still pre-alpha, and having only recently received its second character class, the solidity and tactile satisfaction in *Hellgate*'s 24-hour-old show build is remarkable – as is the slightly snobbish relief that, if the Fawkes Devices and eldritch cricket bats are any indication, the attention to detail doesn't stop at the title's colon.









TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED

The driving and racing genres, with their respective loves of the open road and violent competition, aren't quite melding with the grace we'd hoped for in *Unlimited*. Worlds as well as cars, it seems, are colliding on the streets of Oahu. As patrons of Live Marketplace discovered over the course of E3, the game's world is picturesque, enormous and alive with intricate detail. But what its 1,600 square miles can offer beyond sinuous tarmac and unwelcoming woodland is of significant concern, as is the matter of player conduct within it. Will the ownership and exhibition of its gorgeously modelled cars and houses – pastimes we're chomping at the bit to enjoy – be pranged by umpteen careless drivers and casual troublemakers? Hope can be found, however, in thoughtful touches such as the teleporting GPS feature which lets you zap straight to where you want to be, and the auto-adjusting route-planner which guides your joyrides.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **EDEN/MELBOURNE HOUSE**









LUMINES II



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **BUENA VISTA**
DEVELOPER: **Q ENTERTAINMENT**

Apparently saving its more innovative features for the mobile version (which introduces new block types and – rather riskily – a third colour), *Lumines II* appears to be playing it safe and delivering more of the same for its strict sequel. Though it will allegedly contain new battle modes, the short demo available showed off no discernibly new features apart from a glitzier interface with full video playing behind the action, pushing it further in-line with its forthcoming console versions. Many fans would argue that a fresh dose of songs and skins is all another volume needs – indeed many purists would argue that the new visuals may upset the harmony between presentation and soundtrack – but neither group is likely to be disappointed by the arrival of a selection of new tunes.

ELITE BEAT AGENTS



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **INIS**

Though the true winners will be the westerners who have yet to tap their way through iNiS' cheerleading trials, importers have the bonus of getting what amounts to a true *Ouendan 2*, with all-new music and scenarios. On show were two chapters with familiar themes of unrequited love in both human and canine varieties, set to the licensed tunes of Deep Purple and Steriogram, and we can happily report it's lost none of its charm in translation.

BIA: HELL'S HIGHWAY

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **GEARBOX SOFTWARE**

After its cheeky debut trailer – what looked to be target footage kitted out with familiar *Brothers In Arms* gameplay icons – it's reassuring to see that Gearbox isn't letting up on new ideas. It's aiming to match *Half-Life 2*'s seamlessness with a persistent first-person view and no obvious demarcation between levels; the player will command two squads, and there's the blessing of stealth mode commands. No mention has been made of the series' trademark 'situational awareness', but there are 'brotherhood moments', random instances of interaction between team members as they go about their smoothly-issued orders.







INDIANA JONES 2007

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

E3 was rather short on tech demos this year, but the LucasArt stand, made one of the best showings. The demonstrations featured two of the company's key technology investments: NaturalMotion's euphoria system, which allows for fully procedurally generated animation and something it calls 'digital molecular matter' which ensures objects behave as you would expect, not just as objects but as substances – glass shatters, wood splinters, steel dents. The result, it's promised, is that the gamer will never experience the same thing twice, since the world is no longer governed by preset animations and interactions.

In practice, that may not be quite how it feels, since punching a foe to the ground is much the same process regardless of where his feet go when he crumples, but there's no doubting the potential to change the way games are made, and subsequently played. Indeed, it's a prospect that distracts you from the simple excitement on show: a brand new Indiana Jones game.







SEGA RALLY



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SEGA RACING STUDIO**

It's amazing how enthusiastic new technology can make people about somethings as unsophisticated as mud. *Sega Rally* is another driving game which uses real-time deformation of its tracks – from the dust on the surface to the scree and mud underneath – to change the driving experience from lap to lap: even stones thrown up by the wheels of your opponents are real polygons, bouncing off your bonnet as you slide through their dust trail. A simple approach to vehicle set-up – chose between road-spec, track-spec or mud-spec – means that each class will have to deal with their own shifing challenges and opportunities as the track degrades. Visually, signs point to a perfect blend of realistic detail and hallmark Sega simplicity.



RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN

Set to arrive – at PS3 launch – almost a decade on from Insomniac's last dedicated FPS, *Resistance*'s sepia tones haven't dulled the developer's love of hybridisation. That's obvious in the theme, with an alternate '50s Britain besieged by the victims of an alien viral epidemic; in the game structure, flicking between solitary jump scares and chaotic frontline battles; and in a weapon set featuring beefy carbines alongside alien munitions that burrow through walls or curl around corners.

Currently less hybrid is the core gameplay – though smart, solid and



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEA**
DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC**

responsive, there were few surprises in the snippets of deathmatch and singleplayer on show. There's clearly more up Insomniac's sleeve – including motion-sensor functionality and a more detailed multiplayer game to support the main campaign's backstory – but to predict a *Halo*-style turnaround from a show demo to finished product is difficult – as *Halo* itself proved in 2001.

To some degree, all E3 required of *Resistance* was that it showed up, providing PS3 with the same tangible solidity it did in last year's trailer. Insomniac has a keen awareness of when to over-embellish and when to draw the line: the next six months might be the greatest test of that talent.





JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD

Not so much the game of any particular film, but the game of an oeuvre: the assault and acro-battery of Woo's Hong Kong action movie choreography. Besides Woo's obvious involvement and Chow Yun Fat reprising his cinematic role as hard-boiled gunmage Tequila, there's perhaps a third, hidden star in this line-up, in the form of the development studio behind the sturdily entertaining *Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy*. While diving slow-mo gunfights have become the stuff of cliché, their violent consequences haven't yet been done the justice that *Stranglehold* aims for, with environments shredded by Tequila's bullet rain. The not-so-fine art of swings, table slides and banister runs is implemented smoothly, and will hopefully flavour all the Hong Kong and Chicago locales.

FORMAT: **PC/PS3/360**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**









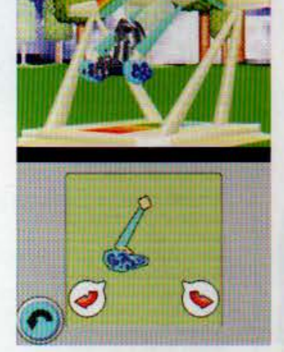
METROID PRIME 3: CORRUPTION



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **RETRO STUDIOS**

The more *Metroid Prime* becomes defined by its interface, the more it feels like a test-bed, and the more it has you feeling like a lab rat rather than an explorer. But at least in *Corruption* someone's spring-cleaned the maze, and the Wii Remote seems a closer approximation of Samus' weaponised arm than of a gun and sword in *Red Steel*. Again the question of calibration arose, the E3 demo failing to recognise swift movements, but the Wii-specific interactions that Retro has shoehorned into this new adventure are still intriguing. A push-twist-pull movement required to unlock doors is the notable example, while Samus' grapple beam is projected with a delicate freehand flick which fits the feeling of the game perfectly.

CHIBI-ROBO: PARK PATROL



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **SKIP**

Without the backdrop of human drama to explore, it's too early to tell whether Robo's move out of the house and into the wild will prove as compelling as on the DS. Still restrained by a steadily sapped battery and still hunting for elusive Happy Points, Robo is now in charge of restoring nature through touchscreen syringe-watering and record-spinning to perk up drooping flora.





TABULA RASA

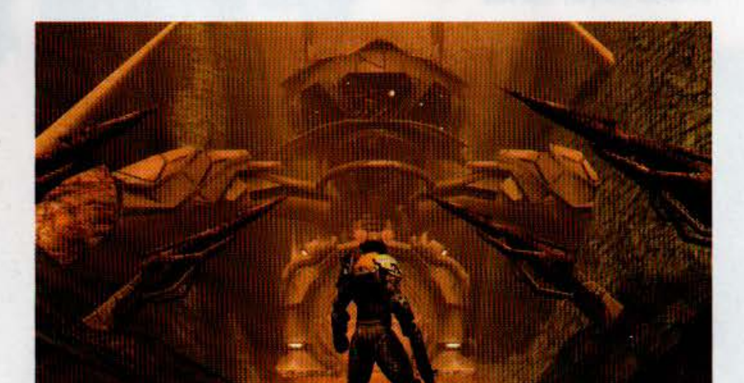
Tabula Rasa isn't quite a blank slate these days, its sci-fi shooter stylings having overwritten a more colourful, less militant incarnation which was scrapped some time ago. "[That style] was an attempt to make this universal artstyle and gameplay that could solve all the world's problems concurrently," reflects executive producer **Richard Garriott**. "Which was sort of a strategic error."

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NCSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **DESTINATION GAMES**

So, flanked by developers in winged-skull logo shirts, combat boots and *TR* dogtags, we enter the reworked MMO genre-buster in search of Garriott's promised "metaphors and touchstones we can relate to in the west".

E3 isn't the most supportive of environments for metaphors, so what becomes apparant instead is a shooter interface, realtime ranged combat, boss fights and a persistent struggle for control points – it's relatable enough, certainly, deftly implemented and often showing something close to beauty.

It's also promised that the design tenets of stronger storytelling and an increased sense of player participation in the world have survived the handover: but we're not yet convinced to stop worrying and love the bombs.



PAPER SUPER MARIO

Though Nintendo has seemingly all but abandoned the GameCube for Wii, with no display units on the floor and no mention in its keynote, quietly tucked away in Nintendo Japan's E3 site was *Paper Super Mario*.

Though *New Super Mario Bros* currently holds the spotlight as the first proper Mario platformer in years, *Paper Super Mario* looks to take all of its traditionalism and convention and flip it on its head, or at least 90 degrees to the side.



FORMAT: **GAMECUBE**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

Played out in a retro-impressionist Mushroom Kingdom and quick to cull from its 8bit legacy, the game will follow Mario, Peach and Bowser though a light RPG-platformer. Each has their own special power, most notably Mario's ability to turn the sidescroller on its side, revealing previously un-reachable depth to the otherwise two-dimensional world, including hidden paths behind un-scalable pipes and front views of paper-thin ladders.

With *Paper Mario*'s penchant for sly sprite trickery, there's every reason to expect that *Super Paper Mario* will likely be as inventive as it is mechanically formal, and with such an otherwise barren horizon, might be the GameCube's last hurrah. And, as such, it's hard not to be reminded of how much more that console had to give.

FATAL INTERTIA



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (CANADA)**

This PS3 racer may have been obscured by the duststorm kicked up by *MotorStorm*, but it's aiming to provide an equally physical experience, despite its futuristic frills. The tracks are solid environments; rock walls aren't just there to hem racers in, but also to provide tumbles of boulders when hit with a missile, while opponents can be effectively unbalanced by successfully landing magnets on the wing of their hovercraft. Each weapon has its own defensive and offensive property, while supreme speed can be achieved by flying as close to the ground as possible, a neat take on race-flavoured brinksmanship. It may be outside Koei's usual area of expertise, and it doesn't lead the PS3 pack in terms of looks, but it has some smart ideas, and is promised for launch.

TOO HUMAN

Silicon Knights' sci-fi take on Norse mythology has persisted within the company for over ten years – and it seems, snowballed. *Too Human* wants to be a expansive treatise on technological dependency, a top-tier action game, a deep RPG and a four-player co-op experience: from its admittedly limited E3 showing, it might have to settle for less.

There's no shortage of thematic flair (reality is metallic and cold, cyberspace a verdant forest) or mechanic experimentation, but the experience is concerningly stilted for its supposed stage of development. Though story, RPG elements and co-op play weren't shown, it would be a shame if they're simply piled on to the aloof gunplay that was.

FORMAT: **360**
DEVELOPER: **SILICON KNIGHTS**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**





UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2007

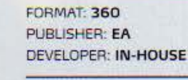


FORMAT: **PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **EPIC**

With its technology adopted by so many of this generation's games, and two other competitive shooters – *Enemy Territory* and *Battlefield* – muscling in on its far-future turf, it's hard to know the influence *Unreal Tournament* will have when it returns. With its jump to PS3 still unscheduled, and its interim promise of PC-exclusive visual splendour scuppered by *Gears Of War*, it's been left with little choice but to put its foot right down to the floor. *UT2007* drives the new Unreal Engine at breakneck speed, with an artistic vibrancy the competition doesn't share. Showcased at E3 was a multi-objective, sprawling mode called Warfare, in which the limelight was stolen by colourful stand-offs between War Of The Worlds-inspired tripods and energy-shielded Leviathan tanks.

ARMY OF TWO

"We call this the 'fuck you' button," deadpans senior producer **Reid Schneider,** but this isn't the old face of the EA, this is the new vision of fresh IP and genuinely innovative gameplay. The idea is as simple as the name suggests: two soldiers of fortune fighting, literally, back to back. Progress depends on co-operation, perhaps holding the rope as your partner rapels down a building, carrying him to safety after he's taken a bullet, or boosting him through a hole in the ceiling so he can take unexpected pot-shots at the enemy. If he's uncooperative you can give him some lip, or use that aforementioned button to produce a very predictable gesture.



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**









But here's the twist: that partner might be someone on Xbox Live, but if you're playing offline, it might not. EA has provided an AI which will query your choices, hassle you if you threaten civilians and shout commands to help you dodge obstacles. An army of two humans seems to be an entirely welcome proposal – finally delivering the stand-alone co-operative game that players have craved for years, and realising J Allard's vision of voice control being for people, not for NPCs. But playing with the AI partner – especially when he bullies you into taking the passive role, or when voice recognition prove patchy – may be a frustrating experience.

Nonetheless, its a very encouraging start for EA's much-trumpeted change of direction towards original game ideas. Evén if some of *Army Of Two*'s more ambitious ideas prove ill-conceived, it's an attempt worthy of support.

THE WITCHER



This is *The Witcher*'s third E3, CD Projekt perhaps by now envying advisor BioWare's ability to announce *Dragon Age* then work on it in complete media silence for years. And yet the Polish studio proves a tireless promoters – out headhunting journalists before the show begins, then animatedly running and re-running their Kentia Hall presentations over the din of neighbouring *Guitar Hero II* shows.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **CD PROJEKT RED**



The game continues to build towards its exhaustive checklist of intentions: the combat system has piled yet more nuance into its mouse-driven interface, evasion now a matter of taking a moment to click away from an enemy rather than on them. A new story vignette was used to demonstrate the wheels-within-wheels of the game's social plotting – though unlike the snippet we were shown in our studio visit, no branch seemed to lead to an unfraught ending.

The Witcher is exciting and daunting a proposal as ever, but it's also becoming an object lesson that good things – well, morally ambiguous things – take time.

TONY HAWK'S PROJECT 8



FORMAT: **360, PS2, PS3, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **NEVERSOFT (360, PS3), SHABA (PS2, XBOX)**

The E3 trailer was the definition of a teaser: all promise, no disclosure. Slow-mo, skewed and zoomed, the footage showed skate icons plying their virtual trade with an emphasis on animation and the sensation of contact. The first wave of details paints something that's more expansion than reinvention: players can watch themselves being filmed via picture-in-picture, ramps and props can be moved around and aggressive pedestrians need to be dazzled in order to garner respect. Most interesting, however, is the ragdoll bail mode, where falls can be controlled for minimal damage or maximum violence; it's tactile improvements like this that will drive a successful next-gen rebirth.

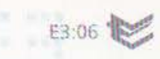


BIOSHOCK

FORMAT: **PC**
DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**

B*ioshock* is frightening. That's something you may already have taken for granted, coming as it does from the makers of *System Shock 2*, but don't be fooled. Bioshock is frightening even at E3, in a wobbly booth, crammed in with other show-goers, with sound from neighbouring stands leaking in.

It's scary partly because its richly illustrated world – an undersea 1950s paradise gone badly wrong – isn't cliched, and doesn't clue you in. It's scary because it doesn't just want to frighten, it wants to unsettle: the tale of a utopian civilisation reduced to child murder and corpse raiding to survive is chilling as well as shocking. It's scary because of tiny details, malevolent secrets hidden in the soundtrack that you truly believe only you can hear, and don't dare to mention to those trying to keep their cool around you. And it's scary because it could all be for nothing if the puzzle-solving, bio-modification based gameplay doesn't provide the right pace of challenge. But that's perhaps something else you can take for granted from Irrational.



COMMAND & CONQUER 3



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (EA LA)**

With the cancerous Tiberium element continuing its post-*C&C2* spread, a further spanner is thrown into the works of this true RTS update with the arrival of a third race to shake up the war between the Global Defence Initiative and the Brotherhood of Nod. There's promise of an AI system that will mirror and best individual's style of play, preventing stale-mates and by-the-numbers victories and plenty *C&C* hallmarks will return, from the real-actor cut-scenes to classic Orca and Mammoth craft. The malevolent Tiberium is the real star here, however, causing areas to be split into colour-coded zones (green, blue and red) dictated by just how much land it has infected.

WOW: THE BURNING CRUSADE

There were enough Blizzard staff at E3 to mount a hostile takeover. Not that they need to: from developers to cab drivers, everyone already knows *World Of WarCraft*. This is Blizzard's biggest showing to date – with only one product, an expansion.

E3's big reveal is the new Alliance race, the extradimensional exile Draenei, who prove so faction-pleasingly photogenic that many attendees spend more time deliberating over character creation than exploring the new content. *Crusade*'s new areas are all comparable to the largest in the original game, expectant of the mass influx of *WOW*'s current top-level players.

The new lands also introduce outdoor player-versus-player objectives, supposedly the first stages of a game-wide PVP overhaul. Though *WOW* has yet to flinch from the upcoming third-generation MMOs, *Crusade* – which will be done when it's done – should further swell its chest.

FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD**

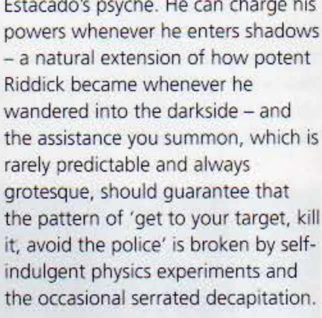




THE DARKNESS

Take a good look at those screens, because they aren't what they seem. That gruesome imp hacking the head off his victim? Those vicious tentacles lifting that car off the road? Those aren't extras, or special effects peripheral to your progress through a standard FPS. Those are you, the manifestations of yourself which you can summon from the dark reaches, thanks to the demonic identity who took possession of you on your 21st birthday.

Based on the Top Cow comic, and made by the creators of *The Chronicles Of Riddick*, these strange phenemenon are as thoroughly integrated into the gameplay as the demon is into hitman Jackie Estacado's psyche. He can charge his powers whenever he enters shadows – a natural extension of how potent Riddick became whenever he wandered into the darkside – and the assistance you summon, which is rarely predictable and always grotesque, should guarantee that the pattern of 'get to your target, kill it, avoid the police' is broken by self-indulgent physics experiments and the occasional serrated decapitation.



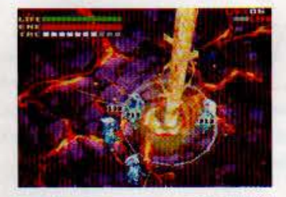
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
DEVELOPER: **STARBREEZE**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**







LUNAR KNIGHTS





FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

Breaking with the past for its first DS outing, the fourth *Boktai* game has a sci-fi foundation for its goth decorum. Taking a more action-oriented course, including 3D shooter sections, the slasher combat on display felt rightfully meaty. *Knights* also promises more DS-specific tricks, like whistling to lure enemies and using the original *Boktai* cart's solar sensor to properly take advantage of what would otherwise be simulated weather.

GUITAR HERO 2



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **RED OCTANE**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**

While it could run for as long as there are anthemic rock classics and celebrated metal tracks, Harmonix has nevertheless plundered the pantheon of guitar music to bring more songs – at least 55 – to the sequel. Bass, lead or rhythm sections will be made available to the player, depending on the track. One vital refinement is co-op multiplayer, allowing for collaborative axe clashes and meaning that two players can riff back-to-back instead of having to face-off over a ping-pong volley of solos. One takes lead, and the other follows with rhythm or bass for a foot-tapping, tongue-lolling, never-blinking team-up rendition of such songs as Psychobilly Freakout and You Really Got Me.

MOBILE OPS: ONE YEAR WAR

Away from the show, Namco Bandai's other next-gen headline-grabber, *Frame City Killer*, was quietly shelved, leaving the latter half of Namco Bandai to provide some 360 support. Dimps seems at first an odd choice for a Gundam skirmisher, but the developer's distant SNK heritage has apparently left an indelible understanding of the weight and speed necessary to do justice to the source material.

In an early build stripped of strategy, weapons or multiplayer, *Mobile Ops* has little more than that understanding to work with, but it's a compelling baseline. As a soldier, your determined sprint drums out a heartbeat pulse in the pad: board a Mobile Suit, and it becomes a steady thunder – the same movement, another degree of magnitude.

Still far from displaying its full visual potential, the game cleverly makes you squint for its imperfections through a stunning day-night cycle: a sunset that burns out the screen, before dropping to pitch blackness until morning dawns with coppery highlights across gunmetal-gray armour.

FORMAT: **360**
DEVELOPER: **DIMPS**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**





DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

With a previously work-in-progress level now polished, shot through with HDR and shafts of cold, golden sunlight, and fully operational for the show, *Dark Messiah* made new friends – and caught up with some old ones, Arkane CEO Raphael Colantonio proudly telling us it had received Doug Church's mark of approval.

Like any physics showcase, there's a certain degree of staginess in the enemies who stand a little too close to precipices or precarious overhead weights. But obvious set-ups make for an entertaining show, and when the game is at its freely sadistic best – such as a brawl in a two-tiered chamber with an open fire, spiked trellises and collapsible balconies – the sense of barely-contained chaos is remarkable.

Coupled with a meleé system that continues to feel physically threatening, drawing such *Vandal Hearts*-like gouts of blood that the Ubisoft reps wince, it's a gripping rebirth for studio and franchise.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **ARKANE**









METAL GEAR SOLID: PORTABLE OPS



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS**

It was probably all planned this way – follow *Metal Gear Solid 3* with the game and story that links it to the original *Metal Gear*, twin snakes that connect two ends of the series as well as ageing and recent hardware. *Portable Ops* is refuge for those who cried out at the appearance of (or maybe while playing) *Metal Gear Acid* in place of a traditional *MGS* outing.

It's 1970, Snake has already become Big Boss, and there's still a flavour of strategy to the game. Allies are recruited in order to develop a bespoke unit of troops to direct in combat, and also used in multiplayer tussles. A practical thirdperson camera is featured, and it would be rude not to expect the odd self-referential gag about no longer playing with twin sticks.



VIRTUA TENNIS 3

On both 360 and PS3, *Virtua*'s show floor build was said to be 20 per cent complete. With no apparent shift in the series' arcade temperament and no surprise features on display, there was little else for show-goers to consider. The bigger question concerned the fact that they looked almost identical Did the PS3's have the edge? Was the 360's running on an inferior screen? More importantly, will the two versions remain indistinguishable once that remaining percentage is in place? Possibly. How much will be added to the barebones arcade mode with which we're all too familiar? More, we hope, than the traditional minigames, nondescript tournaments and irritating enforcement of doubles play. If the demo possessed one convincing trait, it was its look. The stadiums ably reflect the grandeur of pro tour tennis, even if their seated crowds remain blotchy, and the player models put *Top Spin*'s to shame.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SUMO DIGITAL**



WARHAMMER: MARK OF CHAOS

The most dedicated Warhammer players may take weeks to actually begin playing *Mark Of Chaos*: the game's embrace of its licence includes the ability to paint your entire army, unit by unit. It's entirely optional, of course, as the game's driving principle is to scale back resource management and drop you entrails-deep in the action, but it indicative of the loyal tone.

Fielding either an Empire or Chaos army with Warhammer's traditional points-for-units system, holes gouged in your ranks during the campaign can be filled by more exotic mercenary companies. Champion figures must be outfitted with equipment, *WarCraft III*-style, but also have skill trees to nurture – bolstering them for their battle throng-parting duels with the enemy champions.

A strong multiplayer component, with persistent win/loss statistics and miniature trading options, rounds off a package that has obviously been built both for and by the fans.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **BLACK HOLE GAMES**



WORLD IN CONFLICT



FORMAT: **PC**
DEVELOPER: **MASSIVE**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**

While *Command & Conquer 3* is busy reviving a classic, RTS title *World in Conflict* is reviving a classic rivalry: what if the the Cold War never ended, the USSR hadn't dissolved and had instead elected to launch an attack on US and European soil. The spin? There's no base-building, and units that make up your force are purchased with a preset amount of credits, bringing some speedier gratification to the RTS arena. A specialisation class is chosen – infantry, tank or air – giving the player a chance to produce forceful units in solely that category. Each of the two factions has access to relevant 20th century battle technology and a flexible camera system should help make the most of the alternate-reality hullabaloo, Multiplayer matches will have room for up to 16 players.



GOD HAND

This title is not yet concept approved by SCEA', the standees note, and Clover would have been disappointed with anything less. The illogical extension of Mikami's inverse-cool heroes and idiosyncratic controls, *God Hand* had to happen now, in the generation's sunset for glorious arcade swagger.

High plains streetfighter Jean struts and kicks through banditos and demons with a refined tank control scheme – relying on a 180-degree spin and right stick-directed dodges for finesse. Action crackles with impact and sly wit, and the coup de gras is delivered either by the God Hand's 50-yard punch, or taking a spin on the Roulette Techniques. Most went for the Ball Buster – a seismic low blow greeted with a roar of canned laughter.

There's more to *God Hand* than assaults the eye, but in boundless confidence and cheek alone this is a concept that we, at least, wholeheartedly approve.

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **CLOVER**





TRAUMA CENTRE: SECOND OPINION



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **ATLUS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

Trauma Centre DS excelled at putting the patient's life in your hands, and now Wii launch title *Second Opinion* is set to insert an operating theatre between player and telly. The format of mini-game medicine won't change, but the increased spatial control and the addition of defibrillator pads should heighten the urgency of your ER actions. The change of format brings wounds and infections into sharper, more nauseating relief, in a visual style that wouldn't look out of place in *Killer 7*'s lunatic carousel of colour. And you can bet any number of blood packs that the controller's microphone will gush with squelches, slurps and maybe even the odd dying breath.

MAGE KNIGHT: APOCALYPSE

It's not been gifted the most stirring of titles, and may actually have outlived the miniature wargaming licence it draws from, but this hack-and-slash collaboration between Namco Bandai's PC division and Taiwan's InterServ isn't without charm.

While much of the action is predictable (if a guilty pleasure), *Apocalypse* shows a willingness to adapt around its traditionalist core. A more immediate thirdperson control scheme complements click-to-move functionality, and the free camera proves actually practical, able to slide between the extremes of a bird's-eye view to an over-the-shoulder follow throughout the vibrant environments.

Character skills are gained through play style rather than assigning points, ideally leading to the happy side-effect of a more dynamic multiplayer community – although that community is suddenly spoiled for choice again by the renaissance in PC action-RPGs.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **INTERSERV/NAMCO BANDAI**



SID MEIER'S RAILROADS!



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TAKE TWO**
DEVELOPER: **FIRAXIS**

Though it's introduced as a spiritual continuation of *Railroad Tycoon* (that franchise having left Meier's stable), there's a sense that this could as well be *SimRailroad*. A drawn-in viewpoint, and maps that scale more to the local than the continental, allow it to show the human industry that the original's economic model abstracted – from farmers working the grain fields to passengers impatiently lining the station ranks. But then again, even the original wanted to be a model train set on your monitor: it's just now Firaxis is compelled to animate a miniature world around it. It will be interesting to see if that new dynamism widens the appeal of this re-invention.

FRONTLINES: FUEL OF WAR

There was a time when a squad-based FPS with RPG elements sounded like a radical recipe. That time has passed, so now Frontlines needs something else to recommend it. The set-up doesn't quite do it: a bitter war for oil set in the near-future may be more plausible than most, but doesn't immediately give the game flavour. However, its environments may: the goal of the game is always to inch the frontline forward, each mission moving you in painstaking stealth tiptoes or audacious leaps (thanks to the short-cuts that can be created in the destructible architecture) through levels which range from two to ten miles in size.

The fairly free-form RPG elements come into play in both your character's role, in which he earns experience over time, and his weapon specialisation, in which his skill improves through use. There are no respawns: if that character dies, you take over control of one of his squad, and when there's no squad left it's game over. It's a tactic which makes the fully-featured multiplayer a particularly appealing prospect.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
DEVELOPER: **KAOS STUDIOS**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**







TUROK

Extracted from Acclaim's fossilized bones, new Turok doesn't so much walk the path of a dinosaur hunter as a space marine: the titular commando is part of special-ops squad sent to neutralise a war criminal holed up on a hostile planet. There's still room for the prehistoric within the futuristic, though. Genetically enhanced dinos will make up the triangle of combat between human enemies and allies, with the possibility of goading them into turning on the opposition. Initial impressions are of a dark organic look that's halfway between *Metroid Prime* and *Far Cry*, and it'll definitely have its work cut out if it's to move up the increasingly cutthroat food chain of the sci-fi shooter.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BUENA VISTA GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **PROPAGANDA**



BATTLEFIELD 2142



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**

Battlefield hasn't evolved enough to be making era jumps of this magnitude, but it's unfair to dismiss *2142* as an overdressed mod. Weapon balance and vehicle handling issues aside, the game is more a victim of circumstance than of laziness. It boasts just as many innovations as the series' last engine rehash, *Battlefield Vietnam*, but is faced with the prospect of a showdown with the spine-tingling *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*. Titan mode, in which the opposition's shielded capital ship must be boarded and destroyed, has great potential, while vehicles such as the bipedal Battle Walker are far more than just new trucks. Charges across open ground can play out in a familiar manner, but then similarity to *Battlefield 2* is hardly a worst-case scenario.



SPECTROBES

FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **BUENA VISTA GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **JUPITER**



A monster-collection RPG, where the titular creatures are excavated using careful stylus strokes, the dust blown from the fossil, to then be awoken through the use of sound

LEGO STAR WARS II

FORMAT: **GC, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS** DEVELOPER: **TRAVELLER'S TALES**



Increased vehicle freedom, wider stages and the chance to create your own Darth Hanwalker for Free Play; whether thrilled or dulled by the original, you've reason to return

FULL AUTO 2: BATTLELINES

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **PSEUDO**



Sure, creases will be hammered out and features will be added – arena battles for one – but a closer inspection is needed to see just how full a sequel this game really is

FFCC: CRYSTAL BEARERS

FORMAT: **Wii** PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles was the arch-enemy of Nintendo's new easy access philosophy. The Wii's versatile controller and online possibilities should help remedy this

DRAGON QUEST SWORDS

FORMAT: **Wii** PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



A confirmed launch title, it'll be interesting to see how Square Enix reconciles the relentless battles of an RPG with the exertion of using the Wii controller as a weapon

B-BOY

FORMAT: **PS2, PSP** PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **FREESTYLE GAMES**



Sony's break-dancing battle game may seem like unsavoury rhythm action to urbanphobes, but if it can produce fluid moves it'll be one of the best button-poppers around

TONY HAWK'S DOWNHILL JAM

FORMAT: **Wii** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **TOYS FOR BOB**



Leaving behind the series' flatland heartland for some steep-slope action, *Downhill Jam* should provide a change of pace that'll give the combo system some fresh mileage

SILENT HILL ORIGINS

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



After expanding the game universe with the multimedia The Silent Hill Experience, Konami returns to the fetid town's big bang, unveiling the source of the sickness

DESTROY ALL HUMANS 2

FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **PANDEMIC**



Hoping to atone for the pitfalls of the hollow original, *DAH2*'s side-quests are now linked to the plot. A split-screen co-op mode is accessible for the entire game

ELEBITS

FORMAT: **Wii** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



A domestic safari of sorts, mixing *Ape Escape's* mischievous hunts with Wii's freeform movement, as players attempt to unearth the elusive Elebits

SONIC RIVALS

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **BACKBONE**



Sonic hasn't been the best of friends with 3D, but in *Rivals*' it's used for showing more. How can widescreen *not* benefit a character who sprints from left to right?

HUXLEY

FORMAT: **360, PC** PUBLISHER: **WEBZEN**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



This MMO shooter has the welcome mat ready: cities with room for 5,000 players and battles that can occupy 200. There are just three combat classes, however

ZELDA: PHANTOM HOURGLASS

FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD**



Links post-*Wind Waker* journey has the touch – sketch boomerang trajectories and spin attacks – but will it be eclipsed by *Twilight Princess*' handheld techniques?

SAMURAI WARRIORS 2

FORMAT: **PS2** PUBLISHER: **KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **OMEGA-FORCE**



Returning characters have aged, and new ones added (Oda Nobunaga, plus wife, for starters) while ranged attacks have been dropped in favour of new specials

MARIO HOOPS 3-ON-3

FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **SQUARE ENIX**



Mario's relentless sportfolio expands with a game that offers a simpler command set than most stylus-driven DS titles, a set intuitive enough to promise smooth court-play

SCARFACE: THE WORLD IS YOURS

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **RADICAL**



Scarface is looking solid, packs a healthy draw distance and features an adrenaline-style 'Balls' meter. However: it will need more than this to escape the *GTA* clone label

SAINTS ROW

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **VOLITION**



It's worrying that the urban mayhem looks only slightly less graceless than last year's showing. Online gang combat is its best hope for countering *GTA*

GITAROO-MAN LIVES!

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **INIS**



For a port (with additional levels), it feels refreshingly vibrant in its new handheld form, with the limited range of the analogue nub surprisingly well suited to the game

EXTEEL

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **NCSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM BEAM**



NCsoft is expanding its free-to-play, pay-to-upgrade stable with this mech-combat brawler, which features lithe customisable-robos for deathmatches and team missions

APE ESCAPE: MILLION MONKEYS

FORMAT: **PS2** PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **SCEI**



While each successive *Ape Escape* has scaled outwards, *Million Monkeys* is scaling upwards, with the addition of giant mechs and a newfound emphasis on combat

HOT PXL

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **ZSLIDE**



Taking top prize for the most unapologetic *WarioWare* clone, *Hot PXL*'s most surprising aspect is its tribute to Atari's gaming roots – just as *Wario* did for Nintendo

WTF (WORK TIME FUN)

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **D3 PUBLISHER**
DEVELOPER: **SCEI**



D3 dips its toes in the riskier waters beyond cartoon licences with a localisation of *Baito Hell 2000*, and is presumably hoping the *Katamari* clique will latch on to it

CASTLEVANIA: PORTRAIT OF RUIN

FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



A move back toward its more action-based beginnings, *Portrait* is re-emphasising traditional weaponry, with dual characters working in tandem for puxxle solving

CONTACT

FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS**
DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE**



It's hard to get a true feel for RPGs given the pace of E3, but *Contact* was regardless the highlight of Atlus' booth (and one big-name developer's game of the show)



MEDAL OF HONOR: AIRBORNE

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2, PS3, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (EA LA)**



Its authentic WWII Jeep branding may set a new standard for historic sponsorship, but it also heralds the appearance of vehicles driveable by its players, a first for the series

DEATH JR: ROOT OF EVIL

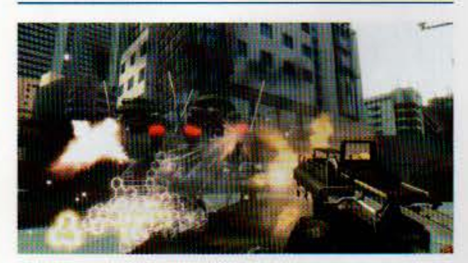
FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **BACKBONE**



A reprise for one of Konami's two original PSP franchises (a third game heads to DS), adding a second character and overhauled combat that's almost exhaustingly relentless

CODED ARMS ASSAULT

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **KONAMI**



A believable gameplay trailer saw *Coded Arms* finally play to its strengths on PS3, battling gunships through the windblown code and flickering streets of a virtual city

MEDIEVAL 2: TOTAL WAR

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY**



Creative continues to expand and refine its way to absolute military simulation of every conflict, ever: here campaigning from the desert Crusades to the New World

ROGUE GALAXY

FORMAT: **PS2** PUBLISHER: **SCEA**
DEVELOPER: **LEVEL-5**



An explicably long conversion means it'll lock horns with *FFXII* and *Kingdom Hearts II*, but its energetic combat and charming complexity won't have dulled

VALKYRIE PROFILE 2: SILMERIA

FORMAT: **PS2** PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **TRI-ACE**



Square Enix's premiere side-scrolling RPG is as luminously attractive as the images suggested, though as with several of tri-Ace's efforts, fights seem more flash than strategy

SHINOBIDO

FORMAT: **PS2** PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **ACQUIRE**



From the original *Tenchu* team comes the physics-enabled, responsive ninja sim the PS2 should have had years ago: its dire lateness may be excused by a non-linear structure

DRAGON QUEST HEROES

FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE/TOSE**



Iconic but unthreatening, *Dragon Quest*'s jellied smileys are turned into light-hearted warmongers, battling in custom tanks and with a pool of 100 slimes for support

PERSONA 3

FORMAT: **PS2** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (R&D 1)**



A return for the high school-by-day, occult-by-night RPG: the Japanese version was shown, so it's yet unclear if a post-Buffy US will be less censorious of classroom pagans

XIAOLIN SHOWDOWN

FORMAT: **DS, PS2, PSP, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **BOTTLEROCKET**



The *Mark Of Kri* developer takes on its most fearsome adversary – kids – by translating the Warner Bros cartoon into an expressive and busy fourplayer beat-em-up

BATTLESTATIONS: MIDWAY

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (HUNGARY)**



This action-strategy hybrid still has the scope of its early incarnation, but a new chunky interface and simple priority balancing promises an accessible theatre of war

DAWN OF MANA

FORMAT: **PS2** PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



However weighty its lineage, there's nothing hanging heavy on *DOM*'s cheery beauty, as the origin of both the Mana Sword and Mana Tree are explored in this prequel

OVERLORD

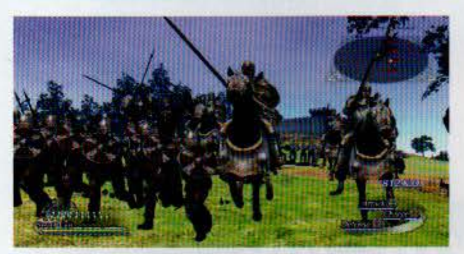
FORMAT: **360, PC** PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **TRIUMPH STUDIOS**



Part Pikmin, part Gremlins, *Overlord's* jabbering minions lay waste – and literally lay their waste – engagingly, but it's too early to tell how long the novelty can carry

BLADESTORM

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **OMEGA FORCE**



Alpha footage from this European-set mob slasher resulted in a 5,000-combo stab to the foot, its placeholder visuals trumped by its 360-based rival *Ninety-Nine Nights*

FORMULA ONE 06

FORMAT: **PS2, PSP, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (STUDIO LIVERPOOL)**



A PSP-powered wing mirror was the least interesting trick up this launch title's sleeve. Separate interior and exterior damage models and AI intimidation gauges also feature

RED STEEL

FORMAT: **Wii** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



No reason was given as to why its reticule-driven look controls were more sluggish than before, but at least the old warehouse test-bed had been replaced by content

DEAD OR ALIVE: XTREME 2

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM NINJA**



Microsoft's line-up could have benefited from a little sun; the now multi-sport *DOAX* was a distant Tecmo trailer – with some flat *DOA4*-like lighting. But it's still early days

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS TACTICS

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **KUJU**



Kuju implements *D&D's* ruleset minutiae and creates a transparent PSP user interface to repeatedly access it. The latter, though customisable, is currently a sticking point

GODS AND HEROES: ROME RISING

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **SOE**
DEVELOPER: **PERPETUAL**



Sadly, the animated combat in this MMO is a front for the genre's usual detached trading of blows. Calling on AI shieldmates or divine patrons for aid is more interesting

BATTLEZONE

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **PARADIGM**



Taking in a tour that's a world away from its wireframe roots – Russia, China, the Antarctic – its hovertank combat should provide a measured alternative to *Twisted Metal*

CODED ARMS: CONTAGION

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Round two for the handheld cyber-shooter, abandoning randomly-generated levels but retaining a forgettable soft-lit industrial dystopia containing few enemies

SUPERMAN RETURNS

FORMAT: **360, DS, PS2, PSP, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



More of its city was open for exploration than at our last encounter, but Tiburon's ambitious title came stocked with little more than standard interactions and battles

VIRTUA FIGHTER 5

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (AM2)**



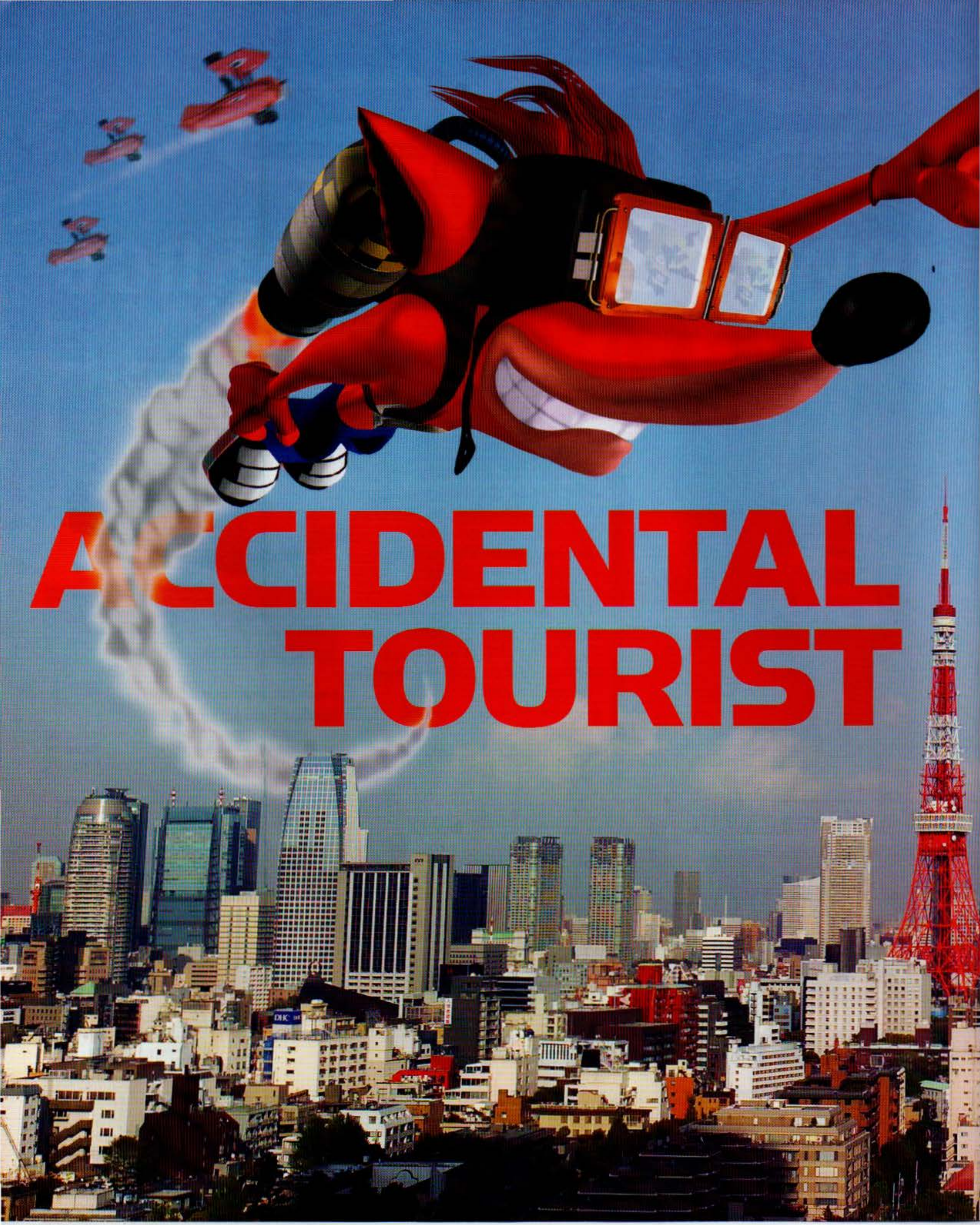
Supposed PS3 screenshots surfaced quickly following the triumphant announcement of exclusivity, but it was hard to believe the source was anything other than Lindbergh

GOLDEN AXE

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SECRET LEVEL**



Sega's newly acquired studio turns this into an action-RPG: after meeting several ex-staffers from *Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows*, we hope it doesn't suffer as ignoble a cutback


ACCIDENTAL
TOURIST

Born in Los Angeles, the bandicoot who helped build PlayStation has since found temporary homes in New York, Vancouver and Knutsford, Cheshire. Now, he belongs to Japan.

Crash Bandicoot is ten years old this year. Coincidentally, a Vivendi Japan marketing manager celebrates his 10th wedding anniversary on the very same day Crash celebrates his birthday. In Japan, it's traditional for a husband to buy his wife a gift of ten diamonds to mark the occasion. Quite who plays husband and wife in Vivendi's relationship with Crash isn't clear – but the publisher is hoping that the 'goofy yet heroic' marsupial will be the one bringing home the riches.

Vivendi, aware that he isn't as iconic as he once was, wants 2006 to be a banner

Clockwise from top left: *Crash Boom Bang!* executive producer Hiroshi Matsumoto; director Takashi Narita; Konami localisation director Masohiro Inoue

year for Crash. The surprise is how it plans to achieve it. Crash will be spinning back into people's affections via one rather formulaic-looking party game, *Crash Boom Bang!*, released on just one platform, the DS, and, crucially, created in Japan by Tokyo-based developer Dimps. The development baton on franchises has passed from east to west in the past, with Nintendo's *Metroid* the most obvious example, but the reverse road is far less travelled. In the face of fellow ten-year-old Lara Croft's canny back-to-basics approach, sending Crash abroad for what's essentially a *Mario Party* seems an odd move.

Those whose reaction to Crash's return is "who cares?" forget his achievements. Run your finger down the list of the world's biggest games, and you'll meet Crash sooner than you might think: *Cortex Strikes Back* and *Warped* are two of console history's 20 best selling titles. At around seven million copies each, that's comparable to any *Metal Gear Solid*, or *Zelda*. In terms of overall franchise sales worldwide, *Crash*'s 30-million-plus copies make it the equal, if not the better, of *Mario Kart* and *Tomb Raider*. And the merchandise – plushes, watches, fridge magnets, toy pinball, cookie jars, McDonald's toys –rivals Mario's and Sonic's.



How did he pull it off? Turn back to Japan. Along with two Rare *Donkey Kong* titles, *Crash Bandicoot 2* and *3* remain the only western games to earn the Platinum Prize – that's one million Japanese sales. *Crash* is the gold standard for western games migrating east – professional translation and dubbing, an anime-inspired character redesign and a fat marketing budget are among the well-documented factors contributing to Japan's unprecedented and as-yet-unsurpassed Kurashu Bandikuu fever. We

Japan counts him as one of their own. No other western game character has enjoyed such worldwide appeal

think of Crash as a quintessentially American character; Japan counts him as one of their own. No other western game character has enjoyed such worldwide appeal: a fact reflected in those top 20 placings.

Vivendi, then, is banking on a Japanese game branded as a series 'relaunch' racking up Japanese sales. Fair enough, as western *Crash* games have, ironically, crashed in sales terms (*The Wrath Of Cortex* barely scraped 200,000 copies, and it's been downhill ever since). There's method behind the party game idea, too: research shows that the Japanese have an increasingly slim amount of time to devote to gaming – bite-size minigames are attractive, especially for the 8-12-year-olds Vivendi is aiming at.

But what about the west? *Crash Boom Bang!* is a Japanese game – with a leisurely pace and arguably too easy for western tastes; decked out in gaudy primary colours a world away from *Crash*'s more familiar browns and oranges. Based on this, will an English-speaking audience that's also rapidly losing interest in *Crash* – of the 12 *Crash* games, the three pre-1999 PlayStation titles still account for about 60 per cent of sales – send the bandicoot to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Mario and Sonic once more?

Photography: Hiroki Izumi





BANDICOOT ABROAD

Making Crash Japan-friendly was largely the job of **Roppyaku Tsurumi**, a designer and producer at SCEJ from *Crash Bandicoot 2* onwards. Tsurumi ensured that a googly-eyed buffoon plainly designed for the US – Universal allegedly instructed artist Charles Zembillas to use Warner's Taz as a template – became something the Japanese loved. His incredible success story formed the basis of a talk at 2003's GDC: How To Make Your Game Successful In Japan.

"The Japanese are intolerant of certain character designs," says Tsurumi. "We're so strongly under the influence of manga and anime culture – and I read about 6,000 pages of manga a week! – that we only accept this style." There were also cultural concerns: green eyes and four fingers are a problem in Asian culture, so Crash gained an extra finger and Pac-Manesque pupils. Both Jason Rubin and Mark Cerny kept in close contact with Japan, tweaking the character and, in some cases, the game's difficulty to avoid alienating the Asian audience.

Other character redesigns – such as Joanna Dark's 'feminisation' for the Japanese version of the N64's *Perfect Dark* – have been less successful. But since 2001, Tsurumi's own design studio, 0600design, has been attempting to recreate the *Crash* magic for *Jak And Daxter* and *Ratchet And Clank*, with big eyebrows, curvier polygon models and busier boxart. "Sales figures for *Ratchet* are 20-25 per cent of *Crash Bandicoot*'s," Tsurumi admits. "But given the overall decrease in sales, I feel that *Ratchet*'s success is almost half that of *Crash*'s."

The success of *Crash* remains an almost unattainable goal for western developers hoping Japan will fall in love with their creations. "Children, our main target, used to think that Crash Bandicoot actually *was* a Japanese character," says Tsurumi. "We made a TV ad where Crash entered a Japanese elementary school. It seemed so natural."



Encouragingly, several *Crash Boom Bang!* minigames pay tribute to Nintendo's own party series – this simple barging battle is reminiscent of *Mario Party*'s excellent Bumper Balls

Hiroshi Matsumoto is Dimps' R&D general manager, a youthful-looking 41-year-old whose surprising heritage extends back to *Fatal Fury* for SNK and *Street Fighter* for Capcom. He co-crafted the Dimps mission statement, a near-poem that talks of games "sent into hyper-space and... disseminated beyond national and racial boundaries regardless of ideologies." The sentiment couldn't be more appropriate given its current mission.

"Yes, it's difficult designing for a worldwide market," Matsumoto admits. "The operation of a game – pushing a button, being surprised, being pleased – this is universal. But characters, universe, music are all culturally different. We receive many, many requests for changes daily from Vivendi in the west. Sometimes we make the changes. Sometimes we make counter-offers. We have to retain the concept's integrity."

Dimps was chosen over a leading party game developer because of its strong conceptual ideas. But Vivendi US and Europe have clearly been nervous about Crash turning Japanese. "They were doubtful at first," says quietly-spoken Dimps' director **Takeshi Narita**. "Over the course of a year, we carried out two separate focus groups in two different countries – which is unusual – expressly because of those doubts." Children in Tokyo and London were tested on *Crash Boom Bang!*'s character design, universe and wifi chat, and asked to rank the artwork and packaging against the obvious competitors. The results eased Vivendi's fears. "At a glance, even western children can tell that this *Crash* is very different to previous ones," says one manager. Is that a good thing? "Yes."

So why DS – and *only* DS? Despite going multiplatform in 2001, Crash can't rid himself entirely of PlayStation mascotry, making PSP seem the natural choice for a 10th anniversary party. "PSP is a great platform," says Matsumoto. "But we knew the hardware would be expensive and Sony would be going for a stylish design. Neither of these would fit with *Crash*'s userbase." Which makes you wonder about *Daxter*'s critical and commercial success in the US and, to a lesser extent, the UK. But Dimps has at least found itself working on the most popular next-gen handheld. Fortuitous, because concept work on *Crash Boom Bang!* began in March 2004, months before DS's launch. But it also means the game's core feature has been overtaken by events –



In early versions, the design changes between western and Japanese versions of *Crash Boom Bang!* can be seen by simply switching the DS system language





Crash Boom Bang! may seem derivative, but with surprisingly few party games on DS – and *Mario Party Advance* a disappointment – it could well clean up

TITLE: **CRASH BOOM BANG!**
FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **DIMPS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JULY (JAPAN), OCTOBER (US, UK)**



It's easy to see how the title's minigames control with the stylus. Deliberate simplicity or imagination failure? It's open to debate

wifi chat was included without the knowledge that Nintendo would build Pictochat into the system.

Dimps hopes that, having remained relatively anonymous behind *Dragonball Z* beat-'em-ups and handheld *Sonic* titles (Sega doesn't even admit Dimps' involvement in *Sonic Rush*'s manual), *Crash Boom Bang!* will raise its profile in the west. We play devil's advocate and suggest that cynical westerners are more likely to

"We learnt the knack for games from fighting games. But we wanted to extend our audience"

wonder aloud why a key figure behind *Fatal Fury* and *Street Fighter* is working on kids' party games based on a faded mascot. "I'm not sure that it would be such a big surprise," Matsumoto responds. "We learnt the knack for games from fighting games. But we wanted to extend our audience; to make games that a father and child can play together."

It's not only Vivendi that has its eyes on Dimps. Konami director **Masahiro Inoue** oversaw localisation on *Crash* for five years, after Universal signed a much-trumpeted licensing deal with the company in 1999. He traces a descending graph line in the air to describe Crash's popularity since *Warped*. And, having spent "considerable time" during his tenure persuading western artists that a cuter Crash and busier box design was crucial for Japan, he's keen to see what happens next.

"I'm concerned about how *Crash Boom Bang!* is going to do overseas," he says. "If its sales are unfavourable in the west, it will be a huge disappointment. I want Vivendi to thoroughly research the contents and the level of difficulty, to ensure it sells in the west." But, further highlighting the strange dichotomy that arises from targeting a range of very different markets, in the next breath Inoue claims that Dimps *is* essentially developing a game for the west. "In America, gamers seem to get quite 'high' from just competing against each other. The Japanese don't really care about this. *Crash Boom Bang!* is, in some ways, a more suitable game for the US."

One Vivendi employee, upon being told of Inoue's comments, admitted he was terrified to hear how closely this passionate Konami manager was watching. But many within Vivendi privately blame Konami for Crash's gradual decline in Japan. TV advertising was slashed after 1999, and 2004's *Crash Nitro Kart* sold appallingly – due in part to a misfocused ad campaign. Retailers are subsequently wary of the brand, making *Crash*'s relaunch that much trickier.

One crucial element missing from Vivendi's *Crash* battle plan is the deep pockets of Sony. Universal Interactive Studios, as it was in 1996, paid only to prototype the original *Crash Bandicoot*. Sony covered the bulk of development and marketing with a huge cash injection, designed to ensure this odd character seeped into public consciousness. It worked – but relations between Universal on one side and Sony and Naughty Dog on the other were strained ("Universal would have killed most other teams," Naughty Dog founder **Jason Rubin** has put it). When respected developer Mark Cerny departed from Universal in 1998, Sony and Naughty Dog chose to leave Crash behind rather than continue working with Universal. Sony was, according to one person close to the project, in a position to purchase Crash – but Universal set the price so high that Sony balked.

In Japan, SCEJ's money delivered a



OLD DOG An interview with Naughty Dog co-founder and Crash co-creator, Jason Rubin.

You're better at creating beloved anthropomorphic animals than most. What's the secret?

This is an incredibly tough question. Even if I thought I knew all the answers, I still couldn't fit it in a short answer. To summarise, it's everything from the design, which must unite the technical capabilities of the machine with the aesthetic design of the character, to the technical, such as how high the character jumps, how long they are in the air, how fast they move, how many challenges before a continue point, and on and on.

And then there is the hard work of (these days) dozens of artists, animators, programmers, designers, and other support staff to bring it to fruition. Most of the time, you go on instincts. The interesting thing is that even though there is so much that goes into making a successful character game, one look at the character and less than a minute on the controller is all it takes for a gamer to know whether you have succeeded or failed.

How did Crash become such a mascot for PlayStation?

In truth, Sony never adopted Crash Bandicoot as the PlayStation mascot. They have always been very clear about this. I think that the gamers chose Crash. After buying 25 million copies of the first four games internationally, placing *Crash* titles near or at the top of almost every territory's top then list around the world, I think gamers chose Crash by popular uprising. He was a "write in".

At what point did you realise you'd truly created a monster?

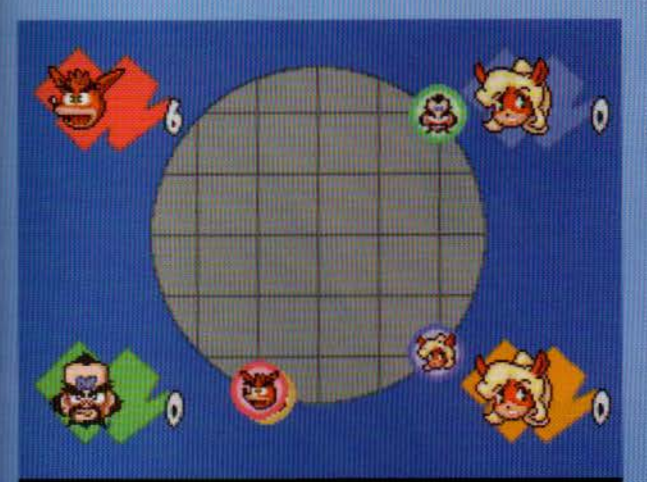
To name a few: Crash Bandicoot on the entire side of the TGV; Crash Bandicoot promoting safety at Australia's beaches; Crash pimping stuffed crust Pizza Hut pizza; and of course, the art and letters we got from gamers.

And how did Crash conquer Japan?

This was a dual result of being very attentive to the Japanese market during game development and trusting Sony's Japanese marketing department. Sony's Japanese marketing department, and our Japanese producers – led by Shuhei Yoshida who now runs Sony's American development – deserve an incredible amount of the credit. It was not luck, but rather development with Japan in mind.

I remember the first meeting we had with Sony Japan, before Shu came on the project. Sony Japan's representatives didn't like the look of the character but couldn't explain why. We listened, and during a lunch break I had Charlotte, one of our artists, change the eyes to







The DS offers Dimps the luxury of a full-sized display for each party 'invitee', which could up the fun qoutient of traditionally weaker minigame ideas – such as mid-air dogfights

Crash comic strip in KoroKoro Comic (the children's equivalent of the three million-selling Shonen Jump!), and TV commercials that popularised 'The Crash Dance' to the point where a Crash exercise video was released. Vivendi, conscious of the success of the Sony strategy, now hopes to repeat the KoroKoro trick. But Crash is hardly the only well-known character on the DS. Japanese children are bought, on average, just two games a year by their parents. Nintendo's big-hitters can fill either or both of those slots with minimum effort. Vivendi's plan is that parents – 20-year-olds who were exercising along with a pelvic-thrusting marsupial in the '90s, 25 per cent of whom were women – will provide the nostalgic kick needed to bring *Crash Boom Bang!* home to a new audience of Crash fans. "Children grow up, but there are always new children," as Narita puts it.

In the UK, US and beyond, Vivendi faces more of an uphill struggle. Crash seems to have evaporated the initial goodwill shown towards him faster than most characters, particularly among committed gamers, and the new game's line-up, which favours Japanese favourites Fake Crash and Tawna over western preferences like Nina, is already attracting the ire of Crash fans on forums. Even if *Crash Boom Bang!* is an overall success, there is still the intriguing possibility that *Crash* will become a primarily Japanese franchise. Its new eastern roots are no guarantee of success in themselves, of course, but at least Vivendi can be sure it won't be rejected on origin alone. "There's a prejudice against western games that come to Japan," admits Dimps' Higuchi. "It's not just among the consumers and users. Retailers, distributors and vendors also share it." And, conversely, these new origins might be exactly what the series needs to rejuvenate its domestic appeal. One American journalist at E3, glimpsing the Japanese Crash character design in the preview version of *Crash Boom Bang!*, liked it enough to suggest that this fatter, cuddlier mascot be made a playable character in his own right.

But regardless of the commercial opportunities, does *Crash* still matter? "It's not about a comparison between now and ten years ago," says Matsumoto. "*Crash*'s appeal works across many age groups here, from children to adults. Dimps' goal – Dimps' dream – is to get as many generations as possible playing the games we've created. I've had the chance in the past to see SNK's arcade games played and enjoyed in Europe, Asia and the US, and I felt the possibility of there being game entertainment that can cross borders and racial barriers. I would like to keep that feeling as a core of myself, and my company. And *Crash* fits this perfectly."

Perhaps Vivendi is right about this being Crash's time. Six years ago, the bandicoot started to slide out of fashion as modern gaming began to grow out of its platforms-and-ladders roots. Now, as it labours under the weight of thirdperson brutality and the blind drive for 'realism', the idea of an anthropomorphic animal bouncing playfully around off-kilter worlds has become, perversely, an exhilarating thought. *Crash Boom Bang!* might not put Crash back in Mario's league here; but in the hands of a Japanese developer comparatively free from the market-driven conformity of the west, a true *Crash 5* justmight take the series full circle.



Most of those involved with Crash in Japan see the character's appeal stemming from his 'goofy heroism'. Such as tumbling to earth without a parachute

little black 'Pac-Man' shapes, close the mouth, change the toothy grin to look sheepish, and reduce the size of his chin. It worked.

Does it surprise you to see the latest *Crash* game being developed in Japan? And as a party game rather than a platformer?
A good developer is a good developer regardless of nationality. And Mark Cerny led Eurocom in making *Crash Bash* after Naughty Dog moved on to *Jak And Daxter*, so Crash has a long party game history.

Do you still know the entire Crash dance by heart?
Nope. I wish I did.

NEW

OLD



WHY PEOPLE ARE BRINGING NEW SOFTWARE TO THE MACHINES WE LEFT BEHIND

Besides fear of redundancy, one thing that keeps designers and engineers moving with technology's current is the promise of opportunity. A simple model of supply and demand for audio/visual phenomena might drive the videogame industry, but the sweetener you'll often hear at developer conferences (swiftly followed by sniffs of scepticism) is that the power to render walks hand-in-hand with the power to create. This technology will make your games *better*. Now try explaining that to someone who develops new games in this, the HD era, for the Mega Drive.

The philosophy behind what seems a contrary movement is simple: you can keep your emulators and your ROMs, we'll keep our consoles and computers. Moreover, we'll keep them alive. It's a slippery slope that begins with the customary retro enthusiasm, and through a process of eliminating whichever compromises degrade the experience (like not having the original controller in your hands), takes you back to the point of pushing real cartridges into real slots. But even with those material components assembled, you can't truly resurrect a console without supplying a sense of anticipation – the invigorating prospect of up-and-coming games.

Thanks to the accessibility of open source tools and emulators, members of the homebrew community have compiled a dense catalogue of remakes and pseudo-sequels, together with fan translations of classic games that never jumped the language barrier to a global audience. But for some, such as the people on the following pages, code is only half the answer. To make a new game for an old system, they believe, you have to make it inside and out. This isn't hardware emulation but industry emulation.

THE BEGGAR PRINCE

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO LEARN A NEW LANGUAGE

When **Brandon Cobb** announced a brand new Mega Drive title in August 2005, he made more headway with the media than almost any other homebrew project to date. In an era of digital distribution, the refusal to publish a game in anything other than cartridge form, in an authentic Mega Drive box, had the kind of perverse charm that marketing men find hard to ignore. *Beggar Prince* is a 2D RPG that invites comparisons to the *Dragon Quest* and *Lunar* series. Its origin: the long-forgotten 16bit title *Xin Qi Gai Wang Zi* from Taiwanese developer C&E.

"It excited me most out of all the Taiwanese RPGs that I encountered for the system," Cobb enthuses. "The graphics are beautiful, the characters are unique, the story is both interesting and humorous, there's more animation than you're likely to encounter in your average Mega Drive RPG and the combat system is well-executed, never bland."

In 1998, Cobb had put together a fan site for the Taiwanese one-on-one fighting game *Super Fighter*, which attracted the attention of Chang Chih Kai, the game's original artist. This contact led to him purchasing the rights to that game from its original developers and releasing it on PC as freeware, under the auspices of his newly founded company, Super Fighter Team. The release garnered support from gamers in its original homeland, inspiring Cobb to further investigate Taiwan's gaming legacy for a potential follow-up.

Having discovered a hacked and malformed ROM of *Xin Qi Gai Wang Zi*, he decided to offer the title to a western audience for the first time. "It was absolutely essential that we support the genuine hardware," he insists. "The folks out there who have a deep love for their Mega Drive will know exactly what I'm talking about; an emulator is useless [to them]."

Once genuine code had been acquired, the next hurdle was translation. "Derrick Sobodash was our script programmer, and he always did a speedy and exceptionally high-quality job. Yu-Chen Shih, our lead translator, had the script translated for us in record time." But bugs in the original code presented a greater challenge. "It was so important to me that these be removed that I decided to halt the project until we could locate the right people for the job. I eventually enlisted Zhi Zhao and Li Liqun, two mastermind Mega Drive programmers from China."

Finding a production facility willing to manufacture Cobb's strict design was not easy, and it would take approaches to ten factories to find one that was suitable. But now the endgame of review and release is near, is he confident of success? "*Beggar Prince* doesn't need to sell a million copies," he replies. "It doesn't need to make me rich and famous; it just needs to exist. It needs to exist for me, and for the other people out there who've yearned for such a release."
www.beggarprince.com

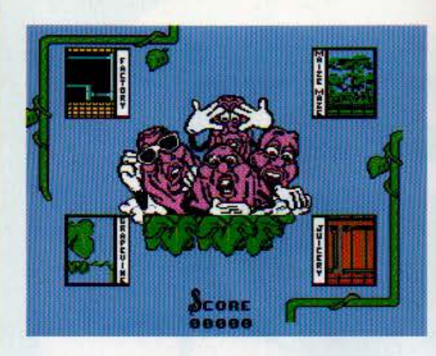
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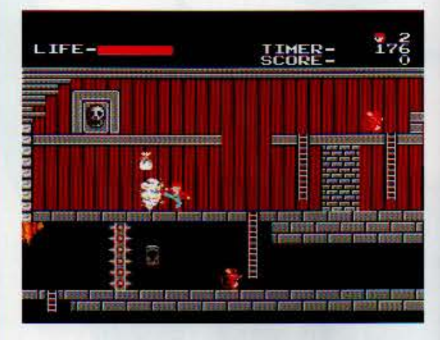
Cobb's outspoken nature differentiates him from the quiet tinkerers who comprise the majority of the retro scene. His approach certainly wasn't popular with RW Bivins (interviewed across the page), head of retro publisher OlderGames – the original intended overseer of *Beggar Prince*'s distribution. Bivins maintains that Cobb has failed to produce any evidence of his ability to fulfil preorders, branding his game "unreleased vapourware." Cobb, however, is unflappable. When asked about delays, he cites problems with manually fitting screws into cartridges ("Fun stuff, let me tell you") and a desire to accumulate more preorders in order to limit piracy. "I don't hold a grudge against OlderGames," he adds, "nor wish them any discredit."



Beggar Prince proves that retro entrepreneurs can provide products that deliver real polish rather than just nostalgia











NES REPRODUCTIONS

**Leon Kiriliuk's NES Reproductions specialises in creating playable cartridges from ROM images using so-called donor carts and original label artwork. Fanatically indulgent as this may seem, Kiriliuk is quick to assert its importance to the community it serves. "It's nothing new, but the one thing I did notice was that there were two different camps when it came to reproductions: users that knew how to do it but didn't care to share, and others that wanted the games but didn't have the aptitude to make their own. And so a niche for me in the community was born. A lot of the mappers inside Nintendo cartridges haven't been 100 per cent reverse engineered and reproduced in software; getting it right can only be achieved on a real NES." And is this a growth niche in the industry? "Absolutely. Flashy graphics can hold your attention for only so long. With older consoles, developers had no choice but to create quality games. Two buttons and a d-pad – what more does a retro junkie need?"
www.nesreproductions.com**



OLDERGAMES

A HOME FOR THE ELDERLY THAT'S REVERSING THE RETIREMENT PROCESS

"If it's not on a store shelf then it's on our radar," says **RW Bivins**, creative director and owner of OlderGames – 'publishing powerhouse of everything retro-gaming.' Moonlighting from his job as a member of The Geek Squad, the technical support team for US retailer Best Buy, Bivins started out in the retro scene by licensing and publishing previously unknown titles for the Philips CD-i. He continued with a stream of so-called aftermarket releases on platforms such as the Neo-Geo CD and Sega Saturn. OlderGames has also come into possession of certain 'holy grails', such as a master copy of *Half-Life* on Dreamcast, a version of *Aliens Vs Predator* for the Atari Lynx, and a previously unreleased Mario game, again for CD-i, entitled *Super Mario's Wacky Worlds.*

Despite his track record of producing viable retro releases, some of Bivins' future projects are a little ambitious, to say the least. Of his upcoming projects, he describes an MMO with the working title *K3 Project*, which he intends to be "a mix between *Command & Conquer* and *Civilization Online*," and another venture entitled *KNURDZ* which he's targeting squarely at the mainstream. "*KNURDZ* will serve as our commercial arm for current gen. We're keeping our eyes on Xbox Live Arcade and the forthcoming PS3 online service."

Professions of foresight aside, however, he's keen to assert his continued commitment to his roots. "OlderGames has supported homebrew game development for as long as it has been in existence, and will always be there to help secure a future for independent efforts on classic gaming platforms. There is *zero* money to be made in the puritan side of classic game development."

The first of the company's current projects is *Icebreaker II*, a sequel to the quirky, genre-confounding action strategy title released for the 3DO in 1995. "It'll contain more enemies, more levels, over ten minigames and both original prototype versions of *Icebreaker* and *Icebreaker II*," says Bivins. "I'm excited about its pending release because of its historical significance. We've successfully encrypted it to play on consumer 3DO consoles – something only The 3DO Company could do in the past. This paves a future for 3DO as the target of new aftermarket releases."

Charles Doty's Sega CD title *Frog Feast* is another original game supported throughout development by OlderGames and then published. As a simple action title, and a tribute to Intellivision's *Frog Bog*, it's been positioned for maximum retro appeal, particularly as its creator is renowned in the emulation scene for ports of titles like *Defender Of The Crown* to Game Boy Color. OlderGames has even developed its own in-house titles, with Bivins' own idiosyncratic *Weird World* text adventures proving popular with C64 owners. "For a game that starts out by saying: '"What a wonderful morning," you say to yourself as you wake up and peer out the window overlooking a nearby pork rendering plant', the only name that fit was *Weird World*."

www.oldergames.com







Popular with crowds at last year's Classic Gaming Expo, *Icebreaker II* was touted as a first for 3DO homebrew, running on consumer machines as well as emulators. OlderGames had similarly grand ambitions for *Beggar Prince*, touting it as the west's first glimpse of a criminally overlooked RPG legend. But a falling out with retro entrepreneur Brandon Cobb over his ability to secure preorders saw the Mega Drive translation project taken elsewhere





ALTEN8

THE COMPANY TAKING CROSS-PLATFORM DEVELOPMENT TO A NEW LEVEL

While OlderGames readies itself for expansion, a UK-based company has already made the leap to licensing retro properties on to other formats. "Alten8 was born out of the idea that retro gaming was far from over," says founder **Paul Andrews**, "and that there was a space in the market for commercial retro games. We've managed to obtain in excess of 500 retro game licences to cover such systems as the Sinclair Spectrum, Commodore 64, VIC-20, Amiga and Atari.

"My initial idea for the games didn't pan out as I had originally envisaged, as I thought we would be working on small-scale production and sales of games for the retro systems. But we then started working on conversions for mobile phones. Many among the hardcore community see us as the enemy, but I don't really understand why as we're actually trying to support indie and homebrew games and development teams. There's a sector in the community which feels that if a game is not now in the shops, it's theirs to distribute as they see fit."

One of Alten8's new-on-old titles is the work of students Amy Worthington and Alex Shaw, and is a platform adventure for the Amiga entitled *Mr Beanbag*. "It'll be completed soon," says Andrews. "It's taken longer than hoped for but it's almost there now. When a trial version was running at CGEUK2, I can honestly say that someone was playing it all day. We intend to also port it to the PC and other formats."

Happy to continue its mobile phone development alongside such endeavours, Alten8 is investing much of its marketing spend in adventure title *Oracle*. "It has to be the game I'm looking forward to the most," Andrews declares. "It's been created by our own coders in conjunction with Blossom Soft, and in it we have potentially one of the best phone games of the year. It has some stunning graphics [for its platform] and is a labour of love. We'd like to describe it as a game created for gamers, by gamers."

Other projects on the company's crowded slate include the revival of Spectrum favourite *3D Ant Attack* on what Andrews describes as "both emulator and other formats," together with an ambitious push to secure GBA publisher status from Nintendo (it's already an official developer), as well as DS developer status. "We're keen to do a DS version of *Mr Beanbag* ASAP," he proclaims. "We hope to be the first port of call for homebrew games looking for an outlet, and I think retro is just starting, not finishing."

www.alten8.com











Alten8 is touting Oracle (left) as a future classic among mobile phone RPGs, while The Last Vampire (above left) is a Spectrum port for the same format. But Andrews' company, founded following his years as a blue chip consultant, refuses to be tied to a single platform, or even a generation of platforms. Shokrok Throwdown (above right) is a PC future sports title, while Mr Beanbag is a 40-level comic platformer for AGA Amigas



SONGBIRD PRODUCTIONS

HOW TO TURN THE JAGUAR AND LYNX INTO HAPPENING CATS

Carl Forhan is 35, happily married and a proud father of three, so you might expect a degree of normalcy in his outlook. Then you discover that his obsession is forwarding the cause of the Atari Lynx and Jaguar by developing their latest, belated range of titles. "In 1998," he begins, "I created a sound tool for the Lynx called SFX, to help me in my own game development. I asked online if anyone would be interested in getting this cart, and to my surprise approximately 100 people signed up in only a few weeks. After that came a few more Lynx games, and I also got the rights to my first incomplete Jaguar game, entitled *Protector*."

That *Defender* clone – once an Amiga game by *Sword Of Sodan* creator Soren Gronbech called *Datastorm*, then an unreleased Mega Drive port and finally an unfinished Jaguar adaptation by Bethesda Softworks' Jorgen Bech – continues to be the most popular of Forhan's releases. "It's an old-school shooter but with updated 3DStudio graphics, massive explosions, bosses, power-ups and the like. It's also the only Jaguar game I've licensed that included source code, which was great because it allowed me to make lots of enhancements. The game I got in late 1998 was probably 60-70 per cent complete. It was playable, but it needed a lot of work. I went about designing dozens of levels, balancing and expanding the enemies, creating new songs and effects and even fixing a few bugs in the original source. The game was cool because no one really knew about it, but I'm proud to have released other games such as *Skyhammer* and *CyberVirus*, because they were 'holy grail' games that Atari fans thought were gone for good.

"There's real value in playing these games on the original hardware. A limited market may exist for making games available for a fee – GameTap, for example, or the future plans of Nintendo's Wii – but I think for my niche market on Jaguar and Lynx it makes sense to create real carts and CDs for the fans. They don't just want something they can play – they want something they can hold and show off."

www.songbird-productions.com

The Songbird version of *Protector* has earned the company a good reputation for workmanship, both in terms of packaging and code. The manual, cart label and box are of almost identical quality to those of commercial releases, even if the game's frontend is bland

GRAND THEFTENDO

RETRO'S MOST AMBITIOUS RELOCATION PROJECT

GTA on the NES. It's a simple concept, but almost unbelievable. "I'd say the majority of gameplay elements that modern games have could be pulled off on the older generations of systems," says **Brian Provinciano**, who's currently busy illustrating this point by creating an original *GTA* tribute title using his own proprietary high-level NES assembler, NESHLA. "*Grand Theftendo* was originally planned as a remake of *GTAIII*.



However, to play it safe, as well as flex my creativity, I made the decision to put together an original game. Neither the story nor characters are from *GTA* – they're all original."

Brian's day job at Backbone Vancouver (originally Digital Eclipse) has him working on PSP titles, so he's well-placed to contrast hobbyist development with its much bigger brother. "I wouldn't say developers have it easy these days, but things *are* quite different. With modern consoles, we still need to worry about memory and processing power, but at the same time we have enough that the designers can still be very creative. With development of older titles, the machine itself controls much of the design. This is part of what gives the games their classic style.

"With *Grand Theftendo*, I generally implement the features as I see fit. After completing one task, I might ask myself: 'What should I do next?' This method works for me. Even though it's not yet completed, I definitely feel the game will be my best work – I've got quite a bit up my sleeve. It is possible that it'll be released on cartridge, though I'll have to assess the situation when the time's right."

www.grandtheftendo.com



Microsoft isn't the only company touting the release of a new *GTA* in 2007. The grossly time-consuming nature of this one-man project initially reduced its scope to the Portland district of *GTAIII*, losing Staunton Island and Shoreside Vale. But the compromise was deemed too great, and the game now features all new content

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

Minerva: Metastasis



A mis-timed *HL2* marathon, aiming to be concluded with the upcoming *Episode One*, created the need for an interim adventure. Unofficial, but worthy of a place in the canon
PC, ADAM FOSTER/VALVE

Guru Logi Champ



The perfect antidote to E3 flight delays, *Logi Champ* is two parts puzzle, one part hypnosis as you spin the blocks to save the day and pass the hours until take-off
GBA, COMPILE

Super Ghouls 'n' Ghosts



Arthur must have been crushed, burned, disrobed and transformed 1,000 times this month, and still the prospect of his upcoming crusade strikes fear into our underwear
SNES, CAPCOM

Last WAN standing

Is it time to retire the singleplayer career?



Fight Night: Round 3 failed in its attempts to provide simulated offline drama, while its EA Nation online mode showed promise. Should this be seen as a portent for the genre overall?

Career modes have long been considered requisites of videogame sports, but Rockstar has put its foot down with *Table Tennis*. The game offers no rags-to-riches tale, fixtures list or league to its lone players, only a series of tournaments to prepare them for its multiplayer modes. It makes you wonder: As Xbox 360 becomes synonymous with Xbox Live, and PS3 looks to achieve something similar, is it time to question the manner in which games indulge their players' competitiveness?

The growth of Microsoft's online service, together with its flawed but popular Gamerscore system, has exposed a widespread inclination toward rivalry. It's a godsend for a sports genre long constrained by the cellular nature of offline gaming, but now that it has the freedom to bring together rivals and spectators in one virtual environment, it must reinvent itself to take full advantage.

It's easy to see the singleplayer career, with its seldom consistent quality of AI or quantity of content, as incidental to such a plan. The more developers have to pore over the logistics of simulating competition, the less time and energy they seem to have when encouraging the real thing. Look at *Top Spin 2*: great offline career, but little on Live beyond the usual exhibition games, where scores and reputations feel as though they're being lost to a black hole.

Imagine what *Fight Night*, or even future sports such as *Unreal Tournament* could achieve were they freed of their singleplayer obligations: organised ladders, special events and broadcast spectator support, all united and maintained in a single package. It's something that PC gaming could have achieved long ago, had it not chosen modularity and versatility over uniformity and focus. Console gaming can now enjoy a similar opportunity, but without being troubled by the same dilemma.

There are counter-arguments, of course, not least from the late adopters of broadband and its console gaming implementations. But the industry is forever breaking eggs to make omelettes, and for far less appetising purposes than bringing a genre to its ultimate form. VF.TV, Gotham TV and now *Table Tennis* have paved the way towards a bold vision of online contest. Who will be first to find out where it leads?

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten

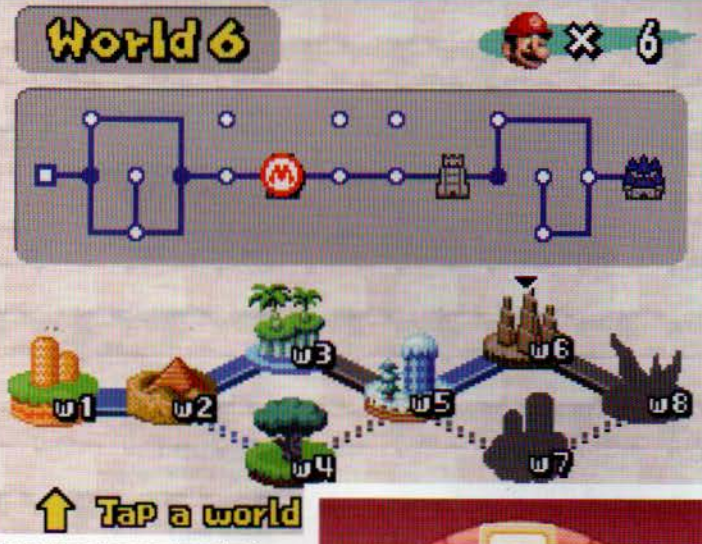




NEW SUPER MARIO BROS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN) JUNE 30 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E162





The world map is gorgeously rendered in chunky 3D; access to the item-giving toad houses and some forks in the road can be bought with star coins, but other pathways – to the cannon shortcuts, or indeed to two secret worlds – will have to be searched for

That title makes it sound so simple. Here is a new *Super Mario Bros*: a fresh set of platforms, hazards, coins, question blocks and bright, mushroom-spotted mysteries for you to bound, bop and tumble through. But it's a bit disingenuous, because seldom has a new entry in a videogame series had such a loaded relationship with its past.

Make no mistake, this is a momentous revival, the first side-scrolling platformer in the classic *Mario* style in 11 long years (15 if you don't count the magnificent but decidedly offbeat coda of *Yoshi's Island*). And it appears on a format whose runaway success gives it every chance – in DS-crazed Japan, at least – of re-igniting the *Mario* mania of the 1980s. So it's appropriate, but also a little deflating, that *New Super Mario Bros* is no continuation at all, but a nostalgic return to source: the essence of the first *Mario Bros* broken down, rearranged into new levels, then dressed up with a few superficial innovations and a greatest-hits



Each level contains three giant star coins, some of which will require great ingenuity and skill to reach, or even find. Collecting them all is the game's true, ultimate goal; as with every *Mario*, it's an enticing scavenger hunt



New Super Mario Bros wields 3D in much the same way that *Yoshi's Island* used the scaling effects of its SuperFX chip, lending elasticity, depth, weight and texture to the flat world. It also allows for vertiginous camera zooms

medley of moves and moments from Mario's long history. In Nintendo's restless search to find new ways to relive old glories, this approach is the most unusual yet, although it's not a million miles away from the GBA's assured remixes of *Metroid*. It's resulted in a game that is not really *New* at all. But it's resulted in a game that is 100 per cent pure *Super Mario*.

In terms of buttons, you get the absolute basics: left, right, up, down, jump and dash; even the spin-jump has been excised. You really couldn't ask for anything more, though. The transformation of those six inputs into Mario's endlessly supple and responsive movement is as wondrous a piece of digital-to-analogue alchemy now as it was 20 years ago. Between them, the steady momentum-build of dash and the variable jump height provide so much finesse and such an ecstatic sense of careering, freewheeling freedom you could swear the buttons were pressure-sensitive, not to say mind-controlled. It's unbelievable that these devastatingly simple devices have so seldom been copied.

Interestingly, *New Super Mario Bros* turns to later entries in the canon for its major control changes – the introduction of the ground-pound and wall-jump – and these are a brilliant success. They relax the design a little by providing a couple of quick ways to get out of trouble, but they also open it up to freer exploration, more daredevil showboating, and ever more unpredictable side-effects. Only occasionally required, they aren't so much integrated with original *Mario* as left to run not within it; they're a delightful sweetener, if not as spectacularly liberating as the flight of *Mario Bros 3* and *Super Mario World*.

Sadly, the same can't be said for the new range of power-ups. Alongside the time-tested mushroom and fire-flower, *New Super*

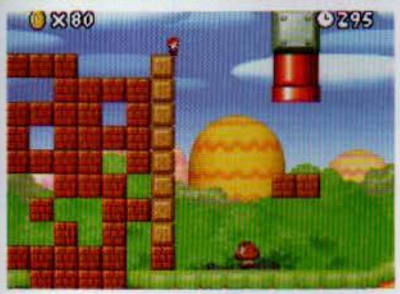








When Mario heads down a pipe, the action moves to the bottom screen – a transition so perfectly literal that you're halfway through the game before you even notice it. It has the awkward side-effect of denying the touchscreen access to spare items, though



Mario Bros introduces the blue shell, mini mushroom and mega mushroom. The mega mushroom, which inflates Mario to gigantic proportions and destroys everything in his path (rewarding carnage with extra lives) is a riotous show-stopper at first, but palls when you realise it's only useful or exciting in certain spots of certain levels, and often leaves you tediously stuck on the scenery.

New Super Mario Bros is a nostalgic return to source: the essence of the first Mario Bros broken down, rearranged into new levels, then dressed up

The blue shell transforms Mario into a spinning shell when he dashes, and it's effective against enemies but inflexible, its only real use being to unlock secret areas by smashing through walls. The mini mushroom, thankfully, is much better integrated, twisting the basis of the gameplay the way a *Mario* power-up should. Providing access to narrow gaps and slender pipes is a no-brainer, but the way Mini Mario sails through the air, runs on water and boings harmlessly off enemies' heads rewrites the playing style without ever jeopardising playability. It's still essentially a key, but – and this goes for the blue shell as well, to be fair – at least the locks are wrought and disguised with more ingenuity than most.

For many players, though, it's the long-awaited return of the Mushroom Kingdom itself – the colourfully surreal style and perverted logic of the level and enemy design – that will matter the most. On this, it's incredibly hard to be objective. Audiovisually, *New Super Mario Bros* is a triumph; misgivings about the abandonment of sprites simply evaporate when you see its gloriously solid, vibrant and faithful flat-plane 3D in motion, while the music and sound effects are an almost unbearably joyous barrage of bleeps ancient and modern that will induce a blissful trance in any *Mario* veteran.

Those veterans, though, are bound to have mixed feelings about the levels themselves. On the one hand, this is 2D *Mario* boiled down to such a basic, archetypal level that those who grew up with the series will find it impossible to be surprised, moved or challenged by it the way they once were. It will be over too soon and too easily for them, and even though a headlong sprint to the finish leaves at least half the game unexplored, post *Mario World* it still feels quite small, linear and lacking in mystery. On the other hand, the opportunity to experience Nintendo's mastery of this form – its unparalleled ability to weave simple blocks, rules and forces into giddy cascades of cause and effect that are at once beautiful, devious and funny – is an absolute delight and privilege. Especially after such a long drought, and even if it is slightly hemmed in by its own self-reverence.

What the prodigal sons and newborn daughters brought to Nintendo's flock by DS will make of *New Super Mario Bros* isn't a foregone conclusion either. The quick finish and relatively easygoing difficulty (by Mario's formidable standards) do make it accessible, and it certainly has the power to confound and astound a fresh pair of eyes like almost no other game. But the old-school agenda results in a rather harsh structure – you can only save after castles, or by unlocking a new route with the special star coins, and losing all your lives will wipe all your progress. That might be reassuringly familiar to lapsed players, but horribly off-putting to new ones (not to mention experienced gamers who've grown accustomed to the permanent safety nets of modern gaming).

New Super Mario Bros is a contradiction. Progressive and reactionary at the same time, it's being pulled in two directions, and ends up caught in limbo; more than a tribute, but less than a true heir, it doesn't quite have the confidence to be its own game. In a family whose every member shouts its individuality from the rooftops, it risks paling into the background. Set it on its own, though – or beside absolutely any other 2D platformer – and it shines with dazzling, kaleidoscopic brightness. Quite simply, nobody does it better, and it seems nobody ever will. **[8]**



Winged question blocks roam the map. The power-up they yield can be a useful clue to how to reach that particular level's secrets. Simultaneously oblique and obliging, this is a classic piece of Nintendo design

Out of touch



The 'Mario vs Luigi' twoplayer mode is a hearty, hilarious scrap. Available for download as well as multi-cart play, it offers several tight wraparound platforming stages, each containing a few conventional threats, power-ups and randomly-spawning stars; the first to a set number of stars wins the round, and lives can be either restricted or (vastly preferable) infinite. It would be a hectic enough race if it were non-contact, but bouncing on your opponent's head makes him drop stars, which in practice is the only way to win, and leads to particularly slapstick, kinetic confrontations. The *Super Mario 64 DS* touchscreen minigames are also included, but in the light of a year and a half of fully-fledged DS software, they've lost almost all their shine, and mostly likely you'll seldom look at them.



HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS2, XBOX PRICE: £50 (360), £40 (PS2, XBOX), £30 (PC) RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: IO INTERACTIVE PREVIOUSLY IN: E155





The game's realtime map remains one of its greatest touches, allowing the player to track the movements of the entire population across the whole stage from the very outset. It hands over just enough psychic power to kickstart strategies; without it, deciphering the lay of each stage's land would be an enormous task

Of those games that strive to capture an ambitious range of human behaviour, *Hitman* must have it the hardest. Granted, it's a self-inflicted pressure for IO's assassination sim. Every stage is a giant and intricate set-piece, populated with mechanical humanity – myriad bystanders, workers, guards and a target or two for you to contract kill – trundling along to the beat of individual schedules, patrols and protocols. Playing a *Hitman* game is as involving as it is disheartening; every neat and wise detail can be tainted by a moment where the AI seems to cross its eyes and stumble, sometimes giving an unforeseen advantage, sometimes laying waste to best laid plans.

For all of the effort invested in *Blood Money*, the core of play hasn't shifted, but it has been accessorised in some neat ways: bodies can be disposed of in large bins or bundled over precarious ledges. Onscreen camera cuts provide updates to key events pertaining to your current targets. 'Accident' kills are now a full-fleshed feature, allowing the environment to be trap-rigged for remote murder in numerous ways. Agent 47 – the game's perfectly sour-faced lead – can now be captured on camera, both by CCTV or even a daring cameraman, to add insult to your rating at the end of each stage. And innocent bystanders pose an unpredictable threat, sometimes terrified into picking up a discarded gun, choosing fight instead of flight.



Every level has its own quirks and touches. At the Mardi Gras, walkie-talkies can be stolen to overhear chatter between targets, conversations can be overheard through a thin wall, and the targets themselves have rather volatile personalities

> For those who play the Hitman games with an eye for macabre slapstick and a maniac's mischief, Blood Money is the series' highlight

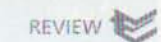
Where *Blood Money* excels is in its scenarios, with strong settings that elevate it above previous games, in terms of atmosphere if not structure. And that atmosphere is very much a party one – a wedding, a bustling riverboat retreat on the Mississippi, a tourist-filled vineyard, a festive-themed shindig and even a Mardi Gras parade. This socialising even extends to fancy dress, with some levels featuring some self-deprecating outfits, be they sailor, clown or a giant bird. Very few of these stages feel as sombre and serious as those of *Hitman: Contracts*, despite the gravity of a storyline that sees 47 becoming cornered by forces beyond his ken. For those who play the *Hitman* games with an eye for macabre slapstick and a maniac's mischief, *Blood Money* is the series' highlight.

As for stage structure, most, such as the opera house and rehab centre, are typical multi-tiered *Hitman* labyrinths. A few others, such as the Mardi Gras and a quiet suburban



Each of 47's custom weapons can be spruced up with over a dozen unlockable upgrades purchased with cash from missions. It can also be spent to lower 'notoriety' – a seemingly confusing and futile reputation system







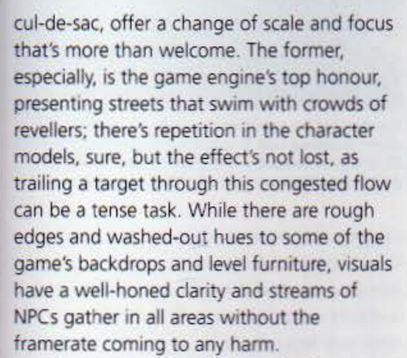








The sallow, rugged faces of *Hitman's* characters transfer well to 360. The thick shadows and exaggerated facial details of the game's mature cartoon style appear smoothly carved, but nowhere near as greasy as many human models that appear on the console





cul-de-sac, offer a change of scale and focus that's more than welcome. The former, especially, is the game engine's top honour, presenting streets that swim with crowds of revellers; there's repetition in the character models, sure, but the effect's not lost, as trailing a target through this congested flow can be a tense task. While there are rough edges and washed-out hues to some of the game's backdrops and level furniture, visuals have a well-honed clarity and streams of NPCs gather in all areas without the framerate coming to any harm.

Hitman games have always had a sweet spot, that period when a player has grown tired of sloppy massacre and begins to experiment with cleaner, more precise methods of execution before coming up against a somewhat frustrating blueprint that dictates the ultimate Silent Assassin ranking achievement. It's this careful improv, rather than the immaculate contract kill, that's *Blood Money's* strongest suit. Achieving the perfect hit – efficient, untraceable and relatively pacifistic – is still a case of decryption rather than imagination, of reverse-engineering the required approach from the props, disguises and opportunities present in each level. A variety of hints can be purchased to outline the steps required in this eventual performance, but accomplishing it remains as much about working with the peculiarities of the game's AI as trying to hoodwink its logic.

That AI has increased faculties for sniffing out evidence of your presence, but can still fall prone to bouts of what feels like fuzzy behaviour; maybe it's perfectly coherent behind the scenes, but trying to suss it out through experience can be tiring. Or worse, the game can jam more than a spanner in your works thanks to the occasional glitch – a garbageman's unconscious body falling through his own truck, preventing you from stealing his clothes, for example – which can rankle when playing at the highest, no-saves difficulty. And then there's the odd design oversight: Agent 47 gets splattered with blood as a result of careless brutality, ruining any disguise he may be wearing. It's a nice touch but, conversely, he can't directly swap a dirty outfit for a similar clean one, and has to find completely different garb before he's allowed to make the switch.

Stealth action games rarely offer as much scope for approach as *Hitman* – be surgeon, or butcher? Scalpel, or chainsaw? It's not just about elaborate sneaking, but also providing plentiful opportunities for skulduggery and thuggery as well; that's always been its appeal, and that's how it remains here. *Blood Money* feels only slightly closer to the series' ideal of a gameworld that's both complex and cogent, and is more accessible and entertaining with it. It's definite progress for those who want to be bit-part killers, but anyone hoping that IO had nailed the perfect hit will likely remain unsatisfied. **[7]**



Hitman's swaying firstperson view is now restrained enough to make it useful if your plans have degenerated into a shootout. The extra peripheral view of thirdperson, however, is just too valuable to play the game as an FPS

While each mission ends with a detailed performance breakdown – noise, violence and notoriety levels, cost and an overall rating – there is no universal stats page for each level so far. It's a strange and jarring omission, given the game's fascination with precision and method

Bloody amateurs



Blood Money **is likeably up-front about its four difficulty settings, outlining the vagaries of each from the very first menu screen. On the simplest Rookie setting, AI is 'accommodating', a true reflection of the dazzlingly short memory spans and concern tolerances of each stage's population, and infinite saves are provided. The screws are then tightened by degrees through to the highest difficulty, where no saves are allowed, the AI is at its sharpest and any trace of evidence left within the stage will detract from your rating. Also, from the Normal setting and above, you'll be fined for not retrieving 47's suit, or any of his custom weapons, from the stage before escaping.**



The flawless and mirror-like sheen of a wet track is really the only unconvincing thing about *MotoGP*'s pin-sharp visual upgrade on the 360: although the trackside detail dips occasionally, this game is all about the lush middle-distances and immaculate bikes, accompanied by a full-throated soundscape



MOTOGP '06

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: JUNE 30
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: CLIMAX
PREVIOUSLY IN: E158, E164

Fast friends



It's not for nothing that *MotoGP* has a strong following on Xbox Live, and it can be expected to recreate that on 360 with little fuss, thanks largely to the very generous 16-player field, with up to four players per machine. There's also a ranking system and the option to run full championship seasons, including practice and qualifying rounds. Straight racing is joined by a Tag mode – in which players capture individual corners by setting the fastest time around them – and the sadly half-developed Stunt races, which award points for wheelies and the like.

Climax doesn't have to work hard to maintain the leading reputation of its motorcycle racing series; Namco's PS2 rival has never topped it, and next to it *Tourist Trophy* looks like a rather dry hobbyist curio. You can argue that with this fourth instalment it hasn't worked hard, because the game is almost identical in feel and features to *MotoGP 3*. Then again, considering the aggressive turnaround – ten months to vault into high-definition audiovisuals, getting the jump on both the 360 racing scene and the still-young 2006 MotoGP season – you can argue that it must have worked very hard indeed.

Followers of the game and the sport will know exactly what to expect: twin-stick bike handling that keeps the finest balance between intuition, realism and technical reward, applied to what is arguably the most exciting motorsport championship there is. As in *MotoGP 3*, the exacting GP formula (in either 2005 or 2006 colours) is joined by three classes of fast and loose street racing in the unlicensed Extreme mode. Both are available as quick races, championships (featuring rider-building in GP's case, bike-tuning in Extreme), technical riding challenges and a comprehensive suite of online and offline multiplayer options (see 'Fast friends'). *MotoGP '06* may only bring a handful of new bikes and tracks, but it's still a handsome package.

If you're new to motorbikes it may still take a little while to acquire *MotoGP*'s distinctive taste, but Climax has sweetened it expertly with perfectly-pitched difficulty settings and a corner indicator that ranks second only to *Forza*'s racing line as a track learning aid. And the GP tracks are most certainly worth learning: 17 expertly-recreated legends, from Shanghai's science-fiction wonder to the tight twists and rises of Estoril, they're mostly tough, but deliver long-term depth and excitement that most videogame course designers can only dream of. Climax's own efforts in Extreme mode certainly don't come close, but then that's almost the point of them in the first place – with their simple, sweeping high-speed bends and bright scenic spectacle, they provide a welcome arcade antidote to the GP tour's technical posers.

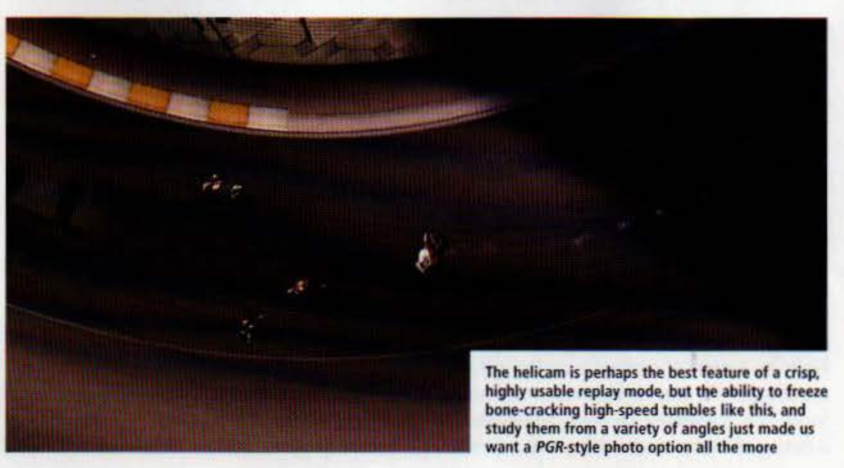
Which makes it all the more baffling that Climax has locked the more accessible side of its game away. Extreme tracks are accessible only by first racing their GP counterparts – in the case of Career mode, a whole season. Putting the sport first makes marketing sense, but turns the game back-to-front, and literally halves it at point of first contact (though GP racing is certainly compelling enough to get you there). It's the opposite of the enlightened all-access thinking that made *PGR3* the standard-bearer for a new generation of racers. But in truth, it's one of very few things about this excellent series that you'd want to change. **[8]**



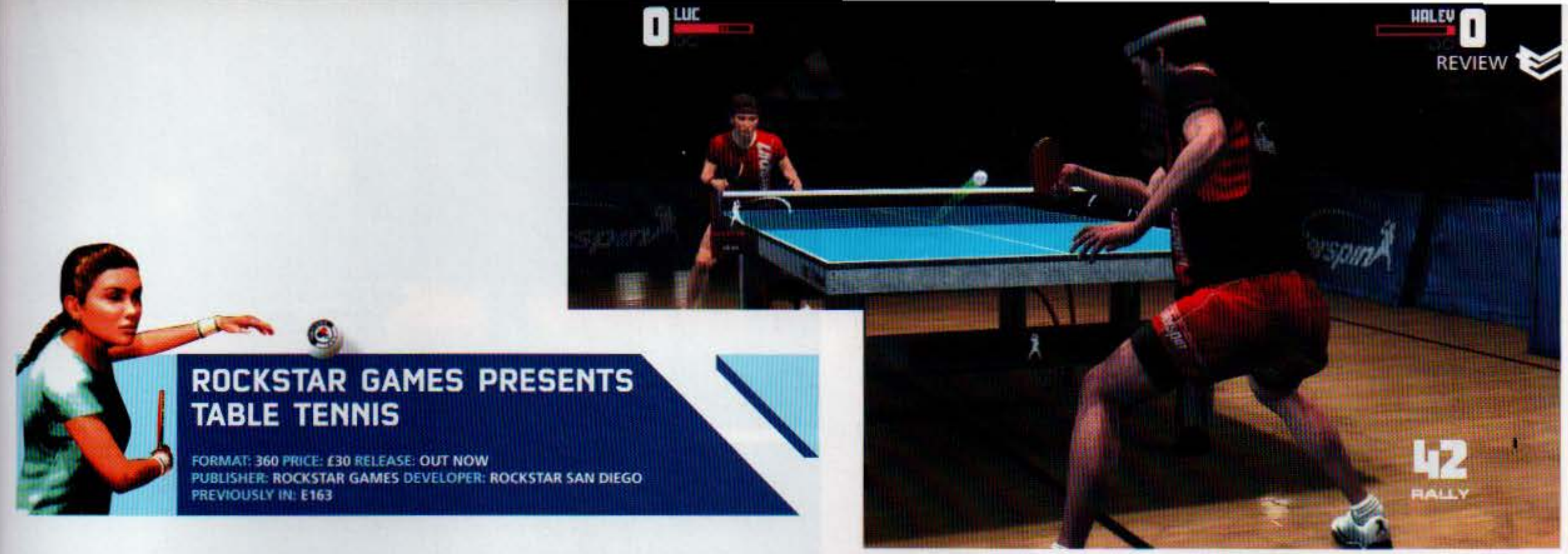
The arrow at the top of the screen shows what type of corner is coming next. It appears at the braking point and its outline turns red if you're travelling too fast for a perfect line. It proves to be a brilliant, simple device







The helicam is perhaps the best feature of a crisp, highly usable replay mode, but the ability to freeze bone-cracking high-speed tumbles like this, and study them from a variety of angles just made us want a *PGR*-style photo option all the more



ROCKSTAR GAMES PRESENTS TABLE TENNIS

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR GAMES DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO
PREVIOUSLY IN: E163

To a sport already limited in scope – staged indoors, around a small table that seldom sees acrobatics – Rockstar San Diego has brought further economy. *Table Tennis* features no doubles play, no career mode, no character creation tool and no nonsense (no fancy dress, exotic environments or pre- and post-match ceremony). The improvement of AI opposition throughout its offline tournaments, progressively challenging you to become a complete pong strategist, suggests that entire portion of the game to be one long practice session for its proper career – the one that begins when you connect to Xbox Live.

Naturally, there are low-level similarities with the likes of *Top Spin* and *Virtua Tennis*, with four spin buttons (or right stick, depending on preference) joining the left stick in determining your shots, as well as your movement off the ball. But the manner in which you carry yourself at the table is crucially different. *Table Tennis*, you'll learn, is ruthlessly tough on those who take their spry behaviour from a lawn court into its domain. Characters here – few in number yet strongly individualised, like those of a fighting game – will lumber awkwardly out of position if moved without care. Victory through power alone is impossible at higher levels of difficulty, the game becoming one in which you must craftily work your opponent out of position with troubling spins, special focus-shots and sudden changes to the pace.

Fans of any videogame racquet sport will recognise some of the irritations that arise, perhaps unavoidably, from its control scheme. Freak misalignments of player and ball can turn an attempted shot into a stumbling sidestep; such is the price of binding both foot movement and ball trajectory controls to one stick. But undue emphasis on mere qualms would sell this modestly-priced package short.

Overall, it's a beautiful rendition, straight in its modelling of rules, physics and athletes but vivaciously presented, serving much on the audio/visual front that'll win points with those keen to quantify 'next-gen'. Thumping music cues build with prolonged rallies, clothing rides and falls with a life of its own, sweat acts as a visual marker of a game's intensity, and every once in a while the ball will hang high above the net, spotlit before the darkened crowd with not one jagged edge or botched texture in sight. In fact, despite the rarest glitch of a bat through the table, this is the most watertight visual experience the 360 has hosted yet, outside of Live Arcade.

Though it sees little point in gratifying those averse to multiplayer, *Table Tennis* is a focused, beguiling ambassador for its studio's pastime du jour. In no way the cheap plug for a market gap that some have suggested, it may point the way forward for a new model of next-gen development **[7]**



Rather than distract itself with character creation tools and stats progression, *Table Tennis* has assembled an international cast of 11 entirely unique and unalterable players. Between them, they cover all of the sport's major strategic classes



Colour-coded spin indicators both whirl around and trail from the ball to aid shot selection, the general rule being that inverting the spin of an incoming shot will cause the most trouble for your opponent

Pong Pings



It makes sense that a game as focused as *Table Tennis* gets a concentrated online component, hardly overflowing with modes but home to a judiciously chosen few. Wisely following the trend of splitting committed and casual players between ranked and friendly matches, its showcase features are those that create a party atmosphere around the table. Spectator mode, for example, allows tournament players to observe the form of upcoming opponents, while timed tournaments limit match duration to keep interest levels high. Predictably, we found that single-bar ping rates caused visual hitches and intermittent lag, but the effect on gameplay was actually less damaging than you'd expect, with dropped connections handled equitably.



Serve power and trajectory is determined by a composite of two bars, one that rises and falls with increasing speed to dictate the former, the other crawling up either side to increase the impact of the chosen spin. The troubling dink is a viable opener, but a master server will know to alternate quick, slow, straight and curved balls and baffle the receiver





THE DA VINCI CODE

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PRICE:** £40 **PUBLISHER:** 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER: THE COLLECTIVE

Cryptic cross words

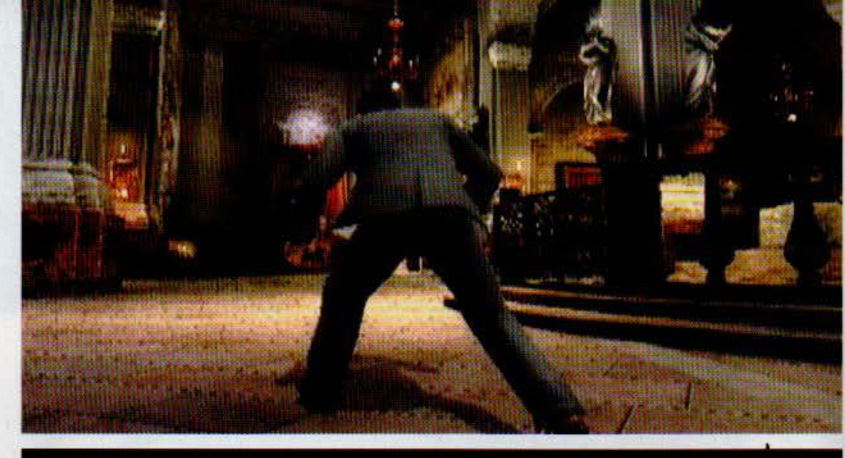


In what seems to be an attempt to feature combat that doesn't reduce to sloppy, button-bash fistfights, enemies are tackled by grapples that lead to exchanges of QTE blows. When an enemy grabs the player, they've got to match a button sequence to dodge the offensive, while taking a hold of your opponent results in the same Simon-says salvo of attacks. Enemies can also be pushed or thrown to let the player cope with more than one aggressor at a time, but subsequent attack sequences are swiftly broken by that meddling second adversary. This does place extra weight on the one-dimensional stealth play, but makes fights feel either dull or frustrating, and rarely anything in between.

The Da Vinci Code requires an old-fashioned peripheral. It's not bundled with the game, but will very likely be to hand: a notepad. While the game is willing provide the information required to unravel a riddle, transporting the solution to where it's needed is often the player's initiative. Is this extra-curricular detective work an intentional way of upping your involvement? Maybe – but there are plenty of puzzles supported by a hint system that's both helpful and savvy. And sometimes the system for tackling a problem feels sloppy, such as translating a semaphore alphabet – the translation is tucked away in your reference database, but you'll have to keep switching back and forth through a stack of menus to decrypt a phrase or, again, return to that notepad. The overall impression is of a game that's both bravely and badly designed, and weighted toward the latter.

It's mixture of bland-but-workable stealth, combat (see 'Cryptic cross words') and head scratching. The ratio of this recipe feels decently balanced, but the quality of the ingredients is questionable thanks to myriad irksome oversights. An unconscious guard in a narrow garden maze becomes an impassable object, meaning he'll have to be dragged completely out of the way if you want to pass by. Then there's the wall ambush feature that only works along certain walls. Sometimes, it's befuddling in a manner that not even the source material itself likely ever intended: During cut-scenes, pressing the 'skip' button bypasses the entire chain of scenes, not just the one you're in. Holding an object – a weapon or even a small tin can that's used to distract guards – prevents you from interacting with anything. There are no camera options, meaning those who prefer an inverted Y-axis or a southpaw stick setup will simply have to adjust when exploring or moving stealthily. And widely-spaced checkpoints make you loath to walk away from an uncompleted level or conundrum, because so much can happen in the time between them.

There are a handful of great puzzles that tickle the brain in just the right way, combining in-game research and the application of smarts in a gratifying manner. They're close to being a saving grace – few games offer logic problems that are so willing to rely on the player's deduction rather than exhaustive dedication. They can keep the game flowing when some of its design seems intent on stopping it cold, or when too much of the intermittent exploration starts to feel like a paper trail of hunt-the-prompt. Ultimately, though, it's more problematic than enigmatic. **[4]**





The Collective's Slayer engine doesn't hold up well, feeling sluggish and basic but still managing the occasional striking interior. The game's overall appearance is far too gloomy, while both in-game cut-scenes and cinematics look roughshod



Characters can jog as well as stealth-creep, but only for a few moments. With so many levels requiring to-and-fro travels, the wheeze that gasps out of them after a short sprint highlights the poor quality of the sound effects



A bizarre piece of design rears its head when the player is trying to drag an unconscious body into the shadows: if you pick it up by its feet you'll automatically drop it after a step or two. Pick it up by its head and you can drag for as long as you like – sadly, triggering one rather than the other is almost pure luck.

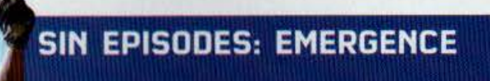


There's a detailed database on hand, recording plenty of information and background for artworks and characters. It retains *everything* from previous levels, but while this emphasises the overarching join-the-dots plotline, it can be tedious to sift through in later stages, and it's also too twitchy to be navigated with the analogue stick



Object manipulation is much the same as in *HL2*, connectors mating with their sockets at a touch. But throwing objects reveals the full extent of the technical lineage – they fire off as if from a gravity gun

SIN EPISODES: EMERGENCE



FORMAT: PC PRICE: $20 (£13) (DOWNLOAD), £20 (RETAIL) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VALVE (DOWNLOAD), EA (RETAIL) DEVELOPER: RITUAL

There's a placard in *Emergence* – one of many that raise a chuckle – that reads: 'When all else fails, use crate.' The urge throughout most of this incessant, unrepentant firefight is to take a spray can to that motto, replacing it with, 'When art direction fails, use pallets, pipes and barrels.' Valve's Source engine lends much to this opening act of the second *Sin*, not least a propensity for wowing the eyes with photorealistic textures, seamless framerate performance on most modern systems and dramatic lighting. But it's also taken away much of the game's impetus to visualise its own universe. It's like a day trip to City 16, where police oppression, a spunky chick, wall-mounted health pumps, pervasive sewerage and a governmental citadel paint an all-too-familiar scene.

Having started on a high note, it ends, about four hours later, on a comparative low. The relentless combat, which at its most intense sees a new enemy spawn with every other footstep, isn't the problem. *Emergence* actually does a good job of keeping its thrill factor high. With the inclusion of incendiary grenades it offers only four weapons, yet gibs its enemies with such fury, spraying body parts and contents across even a widescreen frame, that it's hard to feel cheated. The rules of engagement are traditional, but excited by the secondary fire modes available. A pistol for the heads of foot soldiers, a shotgun for close encounters and an assault rifle for the big boys are all that you're given, and all that you'll require. But depleted uranium rounds, ricochet shells and mortars bless each with a greater, more spectacular punch.

Beyond the definition of its brickwork, water and steel, *Emergence* also draws from Source an exquisite implementation of Havok physics. Enemies readily boot drums of toxic gas during combat, propane tanks (often with people attached) becoming missiles when pricked with a bullet. The downside of this, together with the game's love of confined spaces, close combat and flanking tactics, is that it ends up running headlong into *FEAR* territory – a fight it hasn't a hope of winning. But when attempted at a higher difficulty, at least, it's neither a sleepwalk nor monotonous. Having two difficulty sliders, one through which the player requests a level of challenge, the other determining how far the game reduce that level should they become stuck, is a great invention.

Ritual is clearly a guild of gamers and engineers rather than storytellers. Of all the reasons for episodic content – community feedback, pricing and turnaround times all improving from the consumer's perspective – the one *Emergence* capitalises upon least is narrative enrichment. After great setups for Freeport City and newcomer Jessica Cannon, the game quickly loses its desire to entertain through anything other than base FPS kicks. *Sin Episodes* promised us part one of an epic, but we're in danger of getting a generic formula refined over several iterations, ageing technologically every time. **[6]**



In another inheritance from *HL2*, *Emergence* tries to introduce backstory via flyers and loudspeakers. After Eli Vance's cuttings and Dr Breen's counterfeit rhetoric, it's ineffectual

Kiss kiss, bang bang



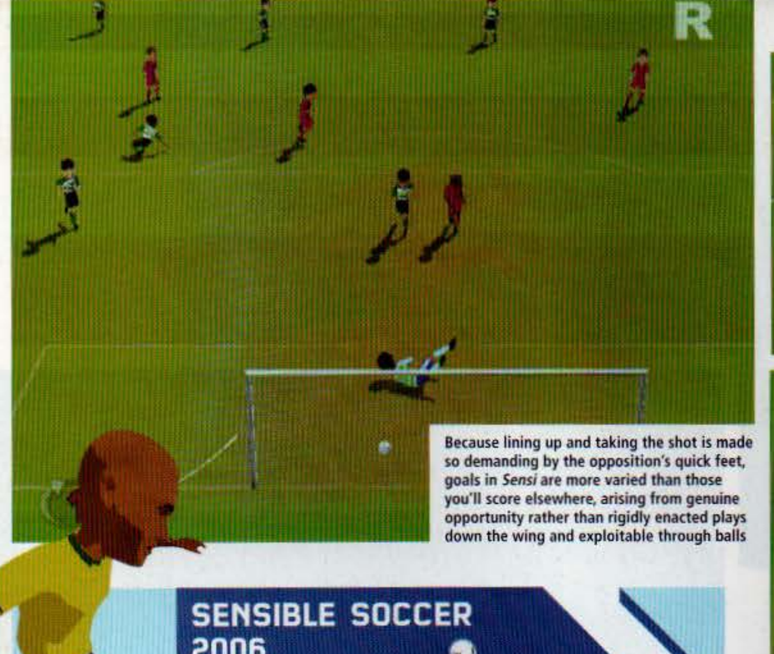
When an old game receives a sequel years later, the common assumption is that it's a classic. *Sin* was a colourful, adventurous shooter with a defiant spring in its step but, as was the case with the original *Perfect Dark*, it was pitifully acted and only modestly stocked with ideas that could stand the test of time.

***Emergence*'s story is a vacuous one of genetic meddling and schoolyard rivalries, with a heroine and villainess who, were the developer free of the need to have the player shoot something, would likely still be flirting well into *Sin Episodes: Backyard Barbecue*. The game also attempts *Half-Life*'s trick of sticking exclusively to a firstperson view, but has (so far) failed to build character John Blade as well as that game did Gordon Freeman.**



While offering a couple of novel rail-mounted shootouts (in which you can duck through the sunroof for protection), Jessica's sports car can also scupper the game's credibility. Accidentally popping its bonnet when trying to get in is daft enough, but watching as it's blown apart by a rocket, its indestructible driver sat oblivious at the wheel, is ruinous





Because lining up and taking the shot is made so demanding by the opposition's quick feet, goals in *Sensi* are more varied than those you'll score elsewhere, arising from genuine opportunity rather than rigidly enacted plays down the wing and exploitable through balls



Though the camera drops to pitch level for match events, it spends the rest of its time hovering in fixed position overhead, tilted only slightly. The manner in which it tracks the ball seems clumsy at first, but works in the end



SENSIBLE SOCCER 2006

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX **PRICE:** £30 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS **DEVELOPER:** KUJU/IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E163

Sensible Soccer or sensational soccer; take your pick, because you can't have both. Not on the same pitch, at least, as the last eight years have shown. It's an impasse that EA and Konami have readily exploited, the promise of a definitive *FIFA* or *PES* being impossible to fulfil, and yet tirelessly plausible to the public at large. *Sensible* has benefited also, because while everyone else has been competing for the visual fidelity cup, its own league of responsive, accurate play has remained uncontested. In theory, it's had nothing to defeat but itself. And, the worry was, that once before it had done exactly that, when it made it's last, and almost entirely unsatisfying, jump to 3D.

The good news is that this isn't *Sensible Soccer 98*. In fact, with eight-directional movement substituted for a full 360 degrees and an added sprint button, it's an idealised version of the Amiga game that's simple and evolved without being mutated. The vertically orientated, fixed play area has dodged the broadcast camera's requirement for conical targeting (where you merely suggest the ball in vague directions and hope it finds a player), and achieved a comparative purity. With the aid of an unobtrusive projected arrow, you aim, kick and curve the ball along precise trajectories, every touch laced with a narcotic sense of heightened control.

But it's worth remembering that it's also a step sideways rather than forwards, to something other but not necessarily better. The knockabout style implemented here is faster and more responsive than those of *FIFA* and *PES*, but no less surreal, with players literally tumbling over one another to win two seconds with the ball. *Sensible* wants to be the option for those who hate everything about what soccer 'simulation' has become, and what it's commonly expected to be. Its primary language is that of a videogame rather than a sport, which means unlockable extras such as turfs and attire, simple stamina bars, exaggerated aftertouch and, of course, caricatured players. Furthermore, its split-second transitions between halves and complete lack of cosmetic furniture are a stark reminder of how toxic videogame sport has generally become.

The game does commit a few fouls, but nothing hugely injurious. Load times are surprisingly long considering the flat textures and cardboard crowds that follow, the substitute screen fails to display those important stamina levels, and frequent in-game glitches will see the ball magnetically drawn to a keeper's hands from several feet away. But no such act of God ever robs you of a goal, and the pace of play ensures that one second's hiccup is forgotten by the next. It's hard to care about any of *Sensible*'s faults in fact, because the game itself is so carefree. When licensed music, commentaries and photorealism are brought down to earth by pure and simple pleasures, it seems churlish to do anything other than join in. **[6**



Sensible rewards players with added personality rather than boosted stats, its Create mode featuring unlockable prefabs such as bouffant hair, vintage boots and even lederhosen. It's a choice companion for the new 3D look

Purist trophies

Ironclad self-assurance and an unwavering direction validate *Sensible Soccer*'s return. Astutely recognising a crowd of gamers alienated by the genre's simultaneously arcane and cumbersome nature, it asks to be played rather than navigated, enjoyed rather than mastered. The preset leagues and tournaments it brings to casual players are immediately accessible, structured competitions that represent various national and international events. Soccer games typically aim for such a blend of diversity and simplicity, but end up stricken with meaningless jumbles of randomly-generated teams, doomed to become repetitive by their more measured pace. The inability of the recent *FIFA World Cup: Germany 2006* to even summarise its tournaments in lucid fashion highlights the need for this game's wisdom, if not necessarily its style.



Without the modern stalwarts of the through ball and trick modifier, *Sensi*'s controls are a no-nonsense suggestion that those of *PES* and *FIFA* have become overburdened. The aim of focusing on skill rather than interface is a profitable one



X-MEN: THE OFFICIAL GAME

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), GC, PC, PS2, XBOX
PRICE: £50 (360), £30 (GC, PC, PS2, XBOX)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: Z-AXIS (360, PS2, XBOX), HYPNOS (GC), BEENOX (PC)





Visually arresting in stills, Iceman's sub-zero surf missions lose much, if not all of their cool once you're given control. Essentially arcade flight experiences with a fixed thirdperson view and humanoid avatar, their rudimentary targeting and brake/thrust controls betray their clear potential

Being entirely unremarkable but for special powers and a snazzy costume isn't disastrous for a Marvel adaptation, so long as the powers are genuinely something special. Looking back over Activision's archives of similar licences, there are a good number of games that reinforce that rule. Mucky Foot's *Blade II* was an idle button-masher saved by moments when its combo-gauge filled, the sword came out and vampire heads, in great number, came off. Likewise for the more focused *Wolverine's Revenge* – sometimes crude, but suitably brutal and reliably entertaining. But there's little that's special about *The Official Game*, as you may have gleaned from its vapid title.

The costume it wears is quite plain, but enough to sneak it onto next-gen systems with only moderate incongruity. Its framerate is brisk and stable, its HD edges are smooth and it bristles with light-sources that flicker on and off to remind you of their presence. But the art direction is uninspired, the characters stingily animated and the cutscenes exquisitely awful. The game offers three playable characters – Wolverine, Iceman and Nightcrawler – with others filling supporting roles as on-demand smart bombs. But only one offers any feeling of empowerment. Able to teleport between distant ledges and enemies, confounding defences in the process, Nightcrawler at least complies with the aforementioned rule, even if his special powers rob several missions of their difficulty.

In fact, had *The Official Game* provided a consistent overall challenge, it would have been bearable, if unexciting. But it hasn't, and it isn't. Its health system, by which players can rejuvenate themselves by redistributing powers and performing special attacks, is dreadfully calibrated. Enemies spawn in increasingly large groups, their freak flurries of attacks quite capable of devouring your energy bar. Upon death, it's back to the level's outset for another slog back to where you were.. Characters are upgradeable, with facets such as speed, power and special attack duration benefiting from points awarded at the end of each level, but the game is too unpredictable, and combat too clumsy, for this attempt at adding depth to succeed. From the maker of *Aggressive Inline*, you'd be forgiven for expecting something better. **[3]**

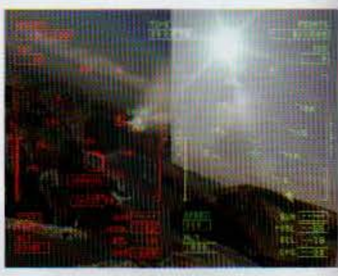
ACE COMBAT ZERO: THE BELKAN WAR

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $40 (£20) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), Q4 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: NAMCO

Since its HUDs evolved beyond woodwork and dials, killing's been the easy part of air combat. It's a circumstance in which simulation games thrive, their appeal being less the destruction of a target than the trigger pull itself, the challenge being to manoeuvre an intricately modelled machine into a strategic position. But with their feather-light jets and simple controls, arcade flyers have it tough. How, after all, do you make memorable a basic routine of fire-and-forget? *Ace Combat*'s answer has long been to dodge the issue with compelling missions, varied arenas and quirky radio chatter, but its sixth episode isn't quite so nimble.

Its basic structure is as functional as ever, indulging your mercenary instincts with low-intensity, score-harvesting raids before occasionally biting back with a boss battle or similar peril. Dogfights still trace the usual figures of eight in the sky, disturbed every now and then by the nuisance of a locked missile. But the game's meagre length is its weakness, and an aversion to checkpoints its downfall. Between the outset and conclusion of its campaign is a crowd of missions intent on playing possum before smacking you in the face, the tedium of repeat play meaning that each blow is a potential knockout. Such ebbs and flows of boredom and achievement inspire further setbacks – unforced crashes and overambitious games of chicken mostly – which of course exacerbate the whole affair.

As it's wont to do, the series has refined its looks and tightened its AI, and while its terrain still resembles porridge at close range, it's attractive enough from afar. Together with thunderous audio, crackling replays, and passable live-action cutscenes, this is defence enough against accusations of laziness. But Namco's design process seems so addled by the multiform calls for improvement – the aforementioned mission design, multiplayer modes (which remain entirely offline), storylines and sheer content volume all trailing expectations – that it's momentarily lost its focus. If *Ace Combat* is to remain battle-ready in the long run, then a considered re-briefing is needed rather than another quick stop to refuel and rearm. **[5]**



The combination of anime excess, colourful in-flight camaraderie and multi-faceted ground and air objectives produces a moderate number of standout missions. But they also highlight the gulf between *Zero*'s highs and lows, lesser missions proving numbingly unambitious







FIELD COMMANDER

FORMAT: PSP **PRICE:** $40 (£22) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (US)
PUBLISHER: SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E161



Replay value should outlast the singleplayer game with numerous online options, scenario editors and an upload and download service for edited maps that is already gaining in popularity. Level creation can become something of a game in its own right, mentally playing out the possibilities while you build

There are some times when first impressions prove correct, when there's just no creative way to avoid stating the obvious, and this is one: call it great flattery if you will, but *Field Commander's* first mission was to crib the notes from Nintendo's playbook and make it its own. That's no denial of the scores of other turn-based strategies that have come before, after and concurrent to the *Advance Wars* series, but instead an unavoidable admission that there is, with few exceptions, a clear correlation between *Field Commander's* units and their abilities, terrain features and division powers – special gauged commands here not tied to a specific officer but to selectable army divisions – and Nintendo's own.

But where *Wars* was always content to be a sprightly caricature of war, it's *Field Commander's* goal to put you directly in it. Through its melodramatic battle-time zoom that sweeps in to reveal spectacularly meaty destruction or the crumpling of a felled grunt, it presents a cohesiveness that *Advance Wars* could ever only hint at, but also an anonymity. Here there's no coming of age for young rookie commanders, and no kabuki-clad comic relief, just the gruff instructions of your own commander notifying you of each successive kidnapping or escaping foe that needs to be quickly routed, and a cast of otherwise entirely interchangeable characters whose names you'll have forgotten before the first shot is fired – an unfortunate narrative oversight for what could otherwise have been a very vibrant world.

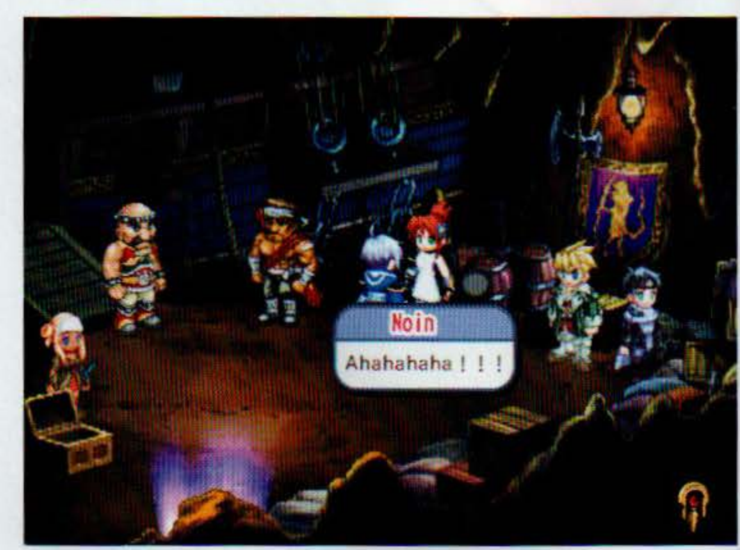
But dig beneath its inspiration and you will find a game with its own pulse. Though successive scenarios are overwhelmingly of the destroy all troops/capture enemy HQ (the prior generally being the favoured route), a handful of campaigns truly stand out, from your first encounter with enemy snipers – working methodically inward to flush out their nests – to across-the-map chase scenes, and only rarely does Sony Online err with an ill-conceived escort mission. Unique skills for some units such as stealth tech or the ability to lay mines also lend an extra layer of defensive strategy.

Though relentless comparisons may seem initially unfair, it could be said that *Field Commander's* inspiration is also its greatest asset: as a result of its close link, the game is every bit as accessible and friendly to newcomers, and deftly balanced and warmly familiar to salty veterans. What it lacks in personality it makes up for in solid mechanics and slick execution, and should do any tactical fanatic proud. **[7]**



ATELIER IRIS 2: AZOTH OF DESTINY

FORMAT: PS2 **PRICE:** $50 (£27)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US) TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA **DEVELOPER:** GUST



***Atelier Iris 2* is an open book, offering lists of inventory items and creatures. It's a shame the tutorials have switched to scrolling notepad sheets instead of the entertaining lectures of the first game, however**

This RPG sequel doesn't so much seek to double the content of the original as rip it in half. It takes place in two worlds, each host to one of the game's lead characters – Felt experiences the adventure and battles of Belkyde, while Viese remains in idyllic Eden, farming and crafting new items. They share an inventory, and control can be switched between the two at save points. For the first few hours of play, the areas that each explores are tiny, with the amount of time spent on the map screen often coming close to that spent roaming the field or fiddling with alchemy items to coax out their optimal properties.

At first it seems this bitty reorganisation is only there to justify the production of a follow-up, multiplying the legwork and diluting the atmosphere in the process. It fractures the experience, and simply leads to frustration, a story-serving device that does little to freshen a formula that's made to feel weedy by its flat environments.



There's a lot for beginners to pick up, especially with the creation of items (through both Mana Elements and recipes) and their secondary properties, weapon synthesis and skills earned from equipped items. Its alchemy-focused cookery system does ultimately prove to be as rich and rewarding as that of the original

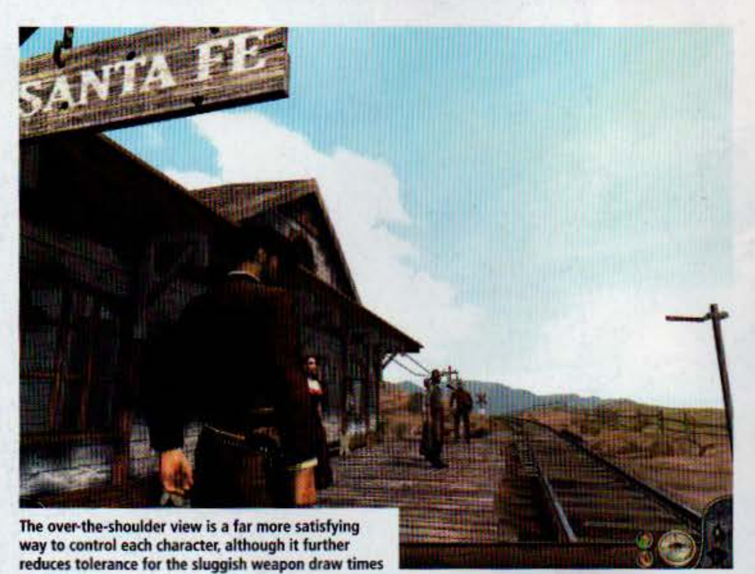
But then its new ideas come good. A coloured vial in the corner of the screen changes from blue to red as the player explores an area, showing an increased likelihood of a random battle. What's more, the vial drains with each successful scrap, and once empty there's no more fighting to be done until the area is revisited. It's a touch that feels more and more astute as the game progresses; ditto for the aforementioned character swapping, that allows the player to leave a dungeon mid-exploration in order to concoct some new items.

Turn-based combat is whipcrack fast, but introduces 'break' attacks, a feature that causes pause for thought. These can knock enemies into a daze, allowing them to be juggled and suppressed with strategic lunges. Again, it's a welcome detail that make battles more gratifying for attentive players. While these new ingredients can be magical, they're not enough to produce a truly golden successor. Nevertheless, it's still an RPG that contains some precious properties. **[6**



DESPERADOS 2: COOPER'S REVENGE

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £25 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: SPELLBOUND



The over-the-shoulder view is a far more satisfying way to control each character, although it further reduces tolerance for the sluggish weapon draw times

Given that the desire for greater control in tactical strategy can only be seconds younger than the genre itself, its enduring rarity is a source of consistent frustration. Genre champion *Commandos* fumbled the transition from isometric map to firstperson views; this more recent pretender combines the two to greater success. While the bulk of your planning is done from a top-down perspective, it's possible to switch to a closer thirdperson view of each of your handful of characters whenever you want – the better to manage shootouts and deploy their carefully individualised abilities.

It's an undoubted improvement. While the only change is perspective – abilities remain unchanged, and can be just as easily employed from the map view – it's far more engaging to take direct control, and it alleviates the traditional frustrations of inexact pathfinding and hard-to-gauge lines of sight as you use your extremely limited resources against a vastly superior enemy. The game features an endearing application of the eternally underused old west environment, too, with saloon-bar stereotypes neatly mapping on to individual abilities – bloodless seduction for the female harlot, alluring tequila for the swarthy Mexican, and so on.

Unfortunately, the camera is an innovation that's as singular as it is welcome, simply offering an interesting vantage point for missions that are anything but. While each is technically open-ended, there's the bare minimum of variety in execution: they lack the fluent expediency of the likes of *Soldiers: Heroes Of WWII*, instead steering you to predetermined ammunition drops between robotically pre-programmed NPCs.



Presentation is acceptable, though only just – while the game's look benefits from being lifted straight from the classic matinee, the hackneyed sound and dialogue most definitely do not

Detection by the AI results in almost immediate death and consequent mission failure, wasting the potential for epic shootouts and leaving only crude stealth. This too falls foul of achingly unsophisticated AI, meaning that victories are hollow triumphs of pattern recognition, trial-and-error identification, and painstaking farming of clueless guards. While the basic mechanic shows promise, the game itself is purely mechanical, and predictably joyless as a result. **[4]**

METAL SAGA

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£27)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: CREA-TECH



Metal Saga's plot is refreshingly free from Armageddon-focused hand wringing and an obsession with fate; while its world is post-apocalyptic, it's anything but bleak. The game's protagonist is simply out to make a name for himself and have the grandest adventure possible

You can finish *Metal Saga* in under two minutes, from title screen to credits sequence. It's just an interactive gag, of course, typical of this RPG's playful nature, and one whose sardonic punch line won't fail to raise a smile. Ask a girl to marry you, and she'll require that you save your game, as a pre-nup. Enter an inn, and you can 'illegally download' music from the jukebox to take with you; sleep in an economy room, and you'll be nibbled by mosquitoes, resulting in a lost hit point. Leave your vehicle parked in an exposed area for too long and it'll get covered in 'bird poo and mushrooms'.

Metal Saga is charming beyond weirdness, but such charisma comes at a price: its launch-title looks and lo-fi production values. Loading times, even between entering and leaving small shops, soon begin to irritate, and the world map is just that, an extremely basic representation of the environment. And there's too much reliance on the exhausting 'press X up against everything' mechanic in order to find the many items invisibly tucked away in each environment.

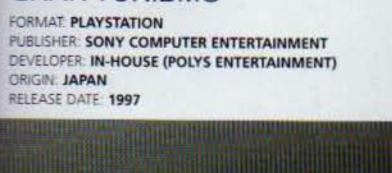


Despite its name and chunky vehicles, *Metal Saga* isn't affiliated with the *Metal Slug* series. They also share a taste for surrealism and wild enemy design, even if *Saga*'s 3D take is far from vivid

Otherwise, it's eager to please and surprisingly open-minded, rarely herding the player or exposing them to compulsory pressure. You can teleport to any visited town almost whenever you like, and the turn-based combat – which allows for battling both on foot or from within the comfort of a range of powerful vehicles – is simple and free from strain. The game only becomes difficult if you decide to explore a little too distantly from the recommended path. Otherwise, you're free to explore, farm experience or bounty hunt. Other aspects, such as vehicle customisation and a wide range of collectible minigames, are far from exceptional but can still distract.

It's all personality and no muscle, a prime victim for getting sand kicked in its face by the numerous RPG beefcakes currently swaggering around on PS2. And that's perhaps justified bullying, no more than the law of the jungle for the genre – just as strong characters are essential for role-playing experiences, so a good imagination and ample patience are the prerequisites for becoming truly involved in *Metal Saga*. **[5**


GRAN TURISMO
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THE REAL DRIVI



TIME EXTEND

GRAN TURISMO

FORMAT: **PLAYSTATION**
PUBLISHER: **SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (POLYS ENTERTAINMENT)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **1997**

Prioritising the rules of the road over those of a game may seem a risky approach for a winner. But Polys' owners' club seldom cut its corners

Put simply, this game was absolutely unimaginable a year before its release." So runs the comment in our 100 Most Significant Reviews special on *Gran Turismo*'s ten out of ten score, and that ten has always provoked debate. Those for it agree there's no question that *The Real Driving Simulator* redefined the console racing game, ripping it from its arcade roots, and set a new standard for the breadth, fidelity and flexibility of game software that would – and still does – cause ripples way beyond its genre. Those against argue that, despite its massive appeal, the almost fanatically obsessive approach it takes to its subject matter does make it an inaccessible mystery to many players; and that, unlike all the other tens, its mighty achievements have very little to do with traditionally good game design.

Of course, it's easy to argue the toss now, after nearly nine years' worth of hindsight, nine years of its revolutionary template being worn into familiarity by imitations and *GT*'s own lavishly hidebound sequels. That comment is a telling reminder of how uncanny it seemed at the time. And such were the shockwaves caused by its graphical and physical realism, it was easy to miss just how strange and fearless it was underneath. Creator Kazunori Yamauchi and his team at Sony's internal studio Polys – later, of course, to gain more independence and fame as Polyphony Digital – were absolutely rejecting the videogame aesthetic, and conventional wisdom with it. They poured countless man-hours into the painstaking recreation of some 150 cars, most of which most players could never hope to use, and many of which had no logical reason to be there. They then broke each model down and opened it up to the user with a tuning system that was like being able to reach into the code and tweak it yourself, a cocky invitation to explore the very limits of its magnificent handling model. And, most strangely of all, they organised it all into a sprawling, progressive game structure that turned its back on every existing variant of videogame racing and instead took inspiration from a most unlikely source: the RPG.

Such were the shockwaves caused by its graphical and physical realism that it was easy to miss just how strange and fearless it was underneath

None of that, though, is immediately apparent in the course of a first, breathless dive into Arcade mode, *Gran Turismo*'s traditionalist facade. You marvel at the slippery reflections, the grainy authenticity of the locations, and just how instantly recognisable the car models are –









Gran Turismo's original tracks – still to be found at the heart of the latest sequel – represent some of the very best realistic course design yet seen in videogames. The achievement was in creating not just technically interesting racing circuits from scratch, but also unpredictable and naturalistic road circuits like Trial Mountain and Deep Forest

something that's still striking today, despite the chunky resolution and sparse polys. You appreciate the precise, distinguishable exhaust notes, the way cars' behaviour doesn't just feel right but looks right as they shift their weight between wheels and skitter across bumps. And, if you'd done the sensible thing and invested in a DualShock to go with the game, you get a third level of sensory input that's no less enthralling.

You appreciate the precise exhaust notes, the way cars' behaviour doesn't just feel right but looks right as they skitter across bumps

At the time of *GT*'s release the DualShock had just arrived, bringing analogue control and rumble effects to the PlayStation for the first time, and *Gran Turismo* was the game that made sense of it, just as it made sense of the game. Of course, the implementation of analogue steering was a huge and obvious bonus of the device. But it was Polys' exploration of the full subtlety and range of its twin vibration motors – inspired by but far more versatile than Nintendo's crude Rumble Pak – that set a benchmark. The twitches of an uneven road surface, the uneasy shiver as grip fades away at speed, the sudden jolt of contact with an unseen rival, the satisfying burr of a kerb glanced at the apex of a corner: this isn't just an extra level of immersion, it is a valuable extra stream of information, delivered straight into your hands.

It was by far the most sophisticated and thoughtful application of rumble effects at the time, and it's scarcely been bettered since. It's ironic and sad that the DualShock 2's lack of analogue triggers and stick sensitivity made it something of a millstone for the series once it reached PS2 because, at the time, *GT* made it sing – and it returned the favour.

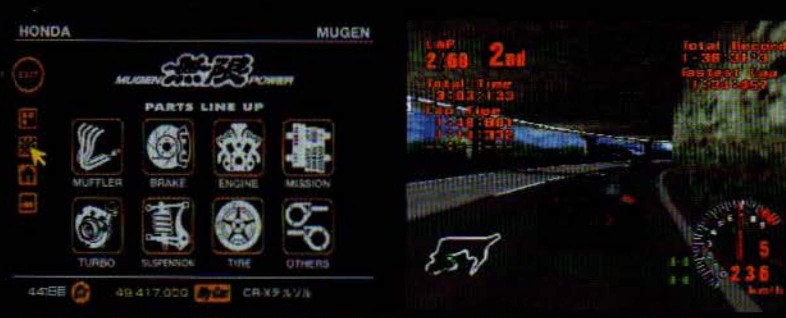
You have to step out of Arcade mode and start on the long road of a *Gran Turismo* career to get past the immaculate sensory sheen and unearth *GT*'s radical agenda for racing games. In doing so you step straight into the first round of the infamous licence tests, the austere lessons in driving technique that provide access to the various championships and racing events. They're almost perversely unexciting; the first thing the game asks you to do is drive a small hatchback in a straight line and then stop it. It's a long way from the seductive rush of the arcade, or even the steep demands of a motorsport simulation. The tests' purpose is to train, yes, but also, by their very dullness, to imply the deadly seriousness of what's to follow. This isn't kids' stuff, and you can't just walk into it; *Gran Turismo* is a privilege that must be earned with graft. Many are put off by them, and it's almost as if they were meant to be.

Licence won, what comes next seems equally mundane. Armed with a modest 10,000 credits, you have to buy a car before you can race it, limiting yourself to scouring the used car lists for a humble family saloon or ageing sports coupé. This, however, is a stroke of genius, a much more inspired and inspiring dose of the humdrum. Poring over the listings and picking a vehicle from the bafflingly large range on offer may seem like a chore, but it's the very foundation of strong sense of identification and ownership the game fosters between player and machine. And while the cars are drab and slow, that you might very well have driven (or at least been driven in) something similar in real life is crucial. Any last vestige of the fantasy world of videogames (even the real-world fantasy of, say, Formula One) is stripped away, the ultra-realistic aesthetic is doubly reinforced, and you get to judge the accuracy of the simulation from personal experience. The decision to start the game at this low level is just as responsible as the draughtsmanlike graphics or credible handling for making *Gran Turismo* feel more real than the rest.

Authenticity is everything in this game. It's what it sells, far over and above its actual entertainment value. *Gran Turismo* is a monument to the art of modelling, and though the huge range of cars is certainly there to



A shopkeeper could place *GT* behind glass and it would sell itself with one replay movie. The sight of its vehicles' chassis lurching upon their axles was a bullet-point expression of the game's authenticity



Gran Turismo's restrained and classy graphical front-end is something of a visual keynote for the first PlayStation – it's one of just a few games for the machine that has a distinctly Sony style to it. This was another way in which the game avoided the slightest hint of frivolity, althought it's just too bad about the jolly jazz-funk accompaniment



impress and to stir up collector mania, you sense that for Yamauchi it is also an end in itself. *GT* was certainly born of a love of cars rather than a love of games, and to this day the series' presentation fetishises their recreation in meticulous, pristine detail. But the equal attention granted to machines ordinary and extraordinary, obscure and famous, from either showroom or pit-lane is what gives it the neutral authority of a work of reference. You may have no interest in three-quarters of the cars on offer, but their very existence validates the authenticity of the ones you do drive, and strengthens your sense of individual choice (a sense then multiplied by the tuning element, as favoured vehicles become pet projects that stay with you the entire length of the game.) This is the videogame as empty vessel, as a vehicle for player self-expression; a bold concept, and a hugely influential one.

Whilst you can extrapolate *Gran Turismo*'s unusual design forward into the beginnings of customisable, sandbox gaming, you can also trace it back to a much more traditional source. It so drastically expanded the scale and lifespan of the racing game by following a path parallel to that of Japan's dominant game form, the RPG epic. The arc is the same: from humble beginnings, you incrementally acquire greater power, in order to best new opponents, in order to earn more currency and in order to acquire greater power still. Buying parts and tuning settings to develop car performance is a close analogue of levelling RPG characters, increasing and tweaking their stats by buying them new abilities and equipment. The experience of playing the game is characterised as much by acres of menu downtime, browsing, comparing, fiddling and planning, as by the action itself.

But *Gran Turismo* takes this genre-clash further than many of its imitators would dare: too far in fact, to the point of self-contradiction. There's almost no limit to which some cars can be modified – basic models reaching absurd heights of nearly 1,000hp when maxed out – and the power ceilings placed on race events are either generous or non-existent. This means that, oddly for a game which places such sober emphasis on pure racing technique up front, improving your skill is only one way to outperform your opponents and move on. Exactly like an RPG, you can succeed in *Gran Turismo* through simple attrition, a willingness to repeatedly 'grind' through easy battles/races to earn excess XP/cash and eventually amass so much firepower that what was difficult before presents no challenge and requires no effort. Furthermore, *GT* doesn't pace that progression as well as the best RPGs do, and players looking to hone their skills in close racing are left guessing how much modding is too much. It absolutely undermines the game's authoritative premise – winning a race by smashing a howling, overpowered monster into the barriers at every corner is in no sense 'real driving'. But it also makes the game's further reaches accessible to players lacking the patience or dedication to truly master it, and that's democracy, of a sort. Where one contradiction rises – between skill-based racing and stat-based progress – another is laid to rest – the friction between the game's hardcore simulation credentials and its strong casual appeal.

No wonder *Gran Turismo* was unimaginable in 1996, at least to anyone but Kazunori Yamauchi. Faced with its dazzling technical accomplishments and coolly glossy presentation, it's easy to overlook just how strange a prospect it is: an extravagant hybrid of involved styles, a labour of love quite unrelated to the creation of a good videogame. In a way, it's the unlikeliest of massmarket blockbusters, but it's certainly one of the most important. Whatever you think of that ten.



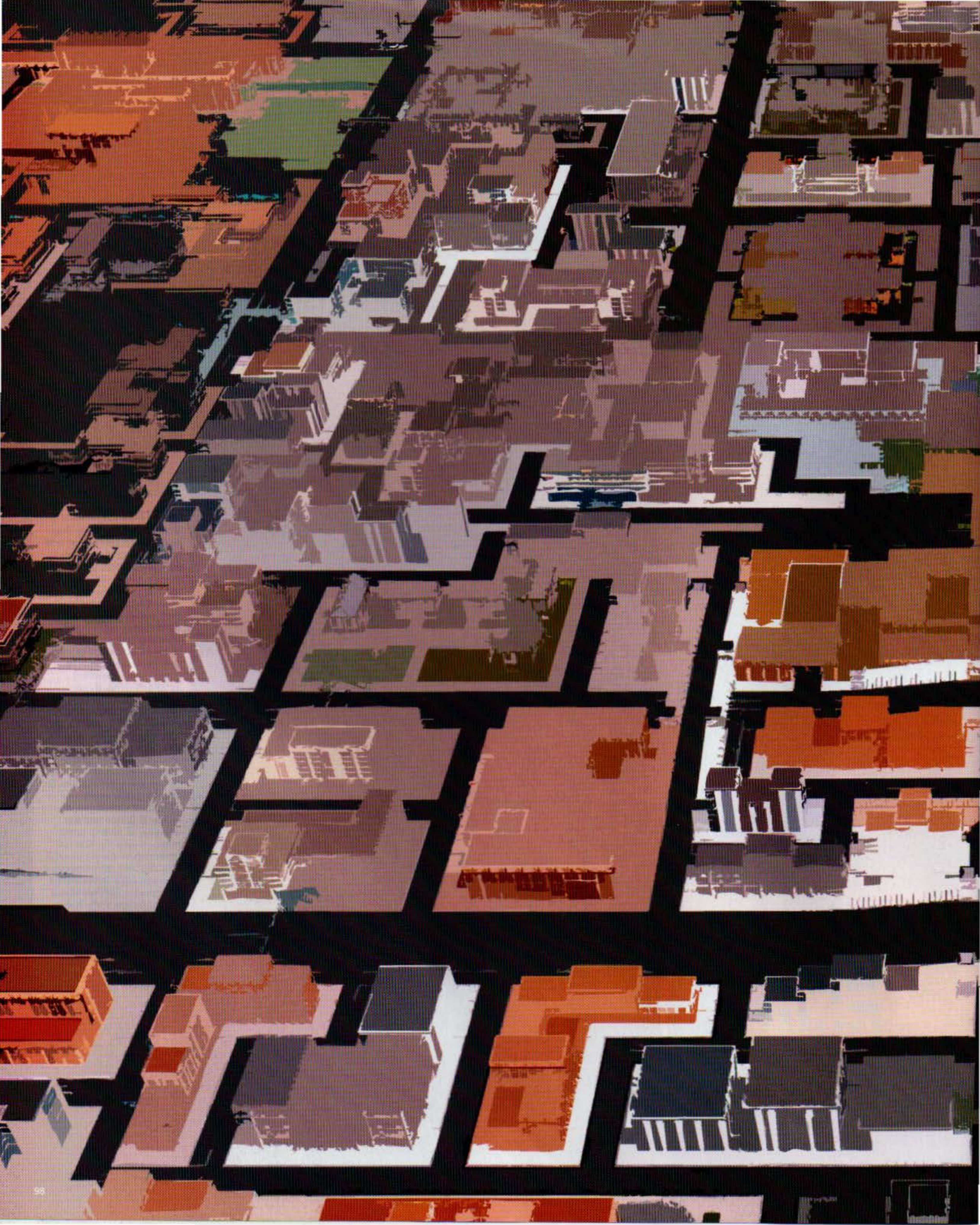


MORE IS MORE

Handling-wise, every *Gran Turismo* remains robust and rewarding to play, right back to the first, despite the on-paper technical edge of the PS2 versions. As consistent (or stagnant, depending on your view) as the series is, picking the ultimate version comes down to pound-for-pound content comparison. The simply dumbfounding extent of *GT4*'s library makes it a hands-down winner even though, in the context of its peers, it's just as awkward as the original *GT* was refreshing. Special mention must go to *GT2* with its cosmopolitan range of cars and competitions, its excellent rally mode and one-make challenges, its looser structure and the addition of several iconic tracks, it was the first full flowering of the *GT* ideal. It also contains Grindelwald, a bucking, high-speed alpine road course that remains a favourite, but sadly it was never to return.



The lack of damage modelling was a licensing issue at first, and, says Yamauchi, has always been a technical one. But one wonders if it's partly because he doesn't want to see his gorgeous models ruined





THE MAKING OF...
GRAND THEFT AUTO

Even before release, and subsequent vilification at the hands of the press, DMA's sandbox was a world of trouble for its creators

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **BMG INTERACTIVE** DEVELOPER: **DMA DESIGN** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1997**

The one thing that everyone agrees on is that they didn't make *Grand Theft Auto*, but that's not strictly fair: the other thing that everyone agrees on is that *everybody* made *Grand Theft Auto*. Talking to those that worked for DMA Design back in the late '90s it's difficult to get anyone to claim significant credit for themselves, although they're generous with praise for others. Development of *Grand Theft Auto*, or *Race'n'Chase* as it was originally known before a clash with a Matchbox slot-car racer forced a change, was collaborative and often tempestuous, and as a consequence it's extremely difficult to pin down the specific turning points, even for those who were there at the time.

Its early days, however, are somewhat easier to piece together. "The original idea was to create a game based in a living city," remembers DMA lyricist and PR head **Brian Baglow**. "The idea was to build an active environment that could react to the player and where there were consequences to their actions."

The development of Grand Theft Auto was collaborative and often tempestuous and is difficult to pin down to any specific events

Developers at DMA had grown tired of the stereotyped settings and implausible enemies that seemingly existed for no reason other than to harass the player, constantly reminding them that they were playing a game. They wanted something more

convincing, more immersive. 'Living' environments seemed to be the answer and several of the designs being worked on at the Dundee-based developer took this idea to heart. *Body Harvest*, for example, would be set on a series of sparsely inhabited islands, but the most ambitious of these worlds would be to make an entire city.

The first DMA living city bore little resemblance to the final game's distinctive look. Programmer **Mike Dailly** had produced a prototype city engine using a sophisticated, rotateable 3D isometric-style view. The gameplay for this modern-day metropolis was intended to concentrate on direct conflict between rival gangs, largely on foot because the view was ill-suited to driving. Unfortunately, as the engine moved from prototype to production, there were problems getting the required performance – and coupled with the release of the similar looking, if not playing, *Syndicate Wars* it caused the team to reconsider the



me that although I had a side-on engine, all I needed to do was add a floor, and it could be an above engine. So, with programmer graphics, I set about using the previous prototype as a base."

He showed the game to studio boss **Dave Jones**, who was immediately impressed: "It was a good-looking technical demo," he recalls. "By staying with this pseudo-3D engine we could populate the world quite heavily compared to full 3D cities. With the camera attached to a car it would pull out quite a distance as you travelled faster. You got a great sense of depth." The constrained viewpoint allowed Jones to flesh out the concept by concentrating on what was in the city, rather than on what it looked

"We didn't have a clear concept of exactly what the final game would be like. The details were impossible to pin down"

ambitious project. But, fortunately, Dailly had been working on another, unrelated idea.

Platform games had served DMA well and Dailly had been impressed by the new graphical approach from Sega's *Clockwork Knight*. Although at heart a traditional side-view platformer, *Knight* used the 3D abilities of the new Saturn console to add a perspective display to the platforms. This gave them a convincing depth, the end nearest the player looming large, and reducing as it receded into the distance. Dailly had prototyped the effect, and liked it. Could DMA could use this approach for a new game of its own?

A chance remark about top-down racing games, however, got Dailly thinking: "It occurred to

like. "I wanted to create as busy a city as possible. I felt that a classic cops and robbers style of game would really appeal." *Race'n'Chase* was born and pitched to BMG as a title that Jones wanted to develop

Work began straight away putting flesh on the living city's bare skeleton. "We went a little overboard on the simulation," says Jones. "Buses following routes, people getting on and off, traffic lights working properly, a rail network. The more we could make it a mini living world the more fun the game became."

Unfortunately, when development began several problems with the original concept emerged. "No one wanted to play the cops, so we ditched that," recalls Jones, something that he



Three decades' worth of crime cinema helped bring order to the devil may care law-breaking that players instinctively undertook. Its missions derived enough character to attract even the most reckless players



Sold as the videogame equivalent of an NWA album, *GTA* recognised the universal marketing value of controversy. An omen for series episodes to come, the parental advisory notice earned by its content was deemed as much a badge of honour as a warning



has hopefully resolved, as his new studio, Real Time Worlds, is currently producing *APB*, an online action game where players have to make exactly that choice.

The inherent problem with the 'cops' part of this cops and robbers game was that being the good-guy all the time was hard, as anyone who tries to play the final game as a law-abiding citizen will testify. It's harder not to run people over. Baglow summarises the problems: "If traffic was heavy you, as a cop, couldn't decide to drive on the sidewalk, or plough through a busy park. We couldn't let the player do that and reward them. Driving safely and sensibly to your destination – observing all road safety – was about as much fun as *Sim Driving Instructor*."

Changes on this scale were typical of the entire game's development. Although it was very collaborative it could also be extremely fluid, and occasionally contentious, as Baglow remembers: "I sat through heated design meetings, which resulted in tears. Screaming, punches and arguments were common.

"We didn't have a clear concept of exactly what the final game would be like. We knew we had some great mechanics in there and some really innovative new ways to interact, but the details were impossible to pin down until you had most of the other elements in the game. Once you knew how the cars would handle and how the pedestrians would react and so on, you could incorporate that into level design and bonuses."

Elements of the game were added as they were thought of, often as a consequence of some casual tinkering with the behaviour of the living city.

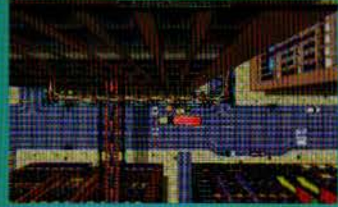
"The Gouranga bonus is a really good example of that," he points out. "One of the programmers came up with a routine that had pedestrians following each other. This led to the idea of a line of Krishnas following each other down the street and then, once we had all experimented with ploughing through them all in one go, the Gouranga bonus became an obvious addition."

This was to be only one of the more minor changes during the development. Several, although essential to making the game a success, would cause a lot of work to be thrown away, as programmer **Brian Baird** recalls: "If we'd stuck to the original design, *GTA* would have flopped.

"The scale of the missions were very small, with the design being a series of short, sharp five-minute missions, returning to a mission select screen in between. Originally the player started as a delivery boy and worked his way up to the top. We quickly found it wasn't fun delivering pizzas."

One of the defining moments of the series happened in early 1996, not long after Baird joined the team. "At that time, we were still a series of small missions," he says. "We had a long, long brainstorming session where we picked up on an idea for one long level containing multiple missions proposed by one of the level designers, Paul Farley. We took this and expanded it into the open-ended structure that the game shipped with. This meant a big expansion of the scripting and improvements to game systems – they had to handle the game running over multiple missions instead of the short structure."

Many ideas and approaches were bandied about, some quite different to the final game. Baird remembers suggestions for a horror theme. "A large chunk of missions were originally planned to be *Omega Man*-inspired. The



Praise for *GTA*'s scale commonly highlights the footprints of its cities and the hustle and bustle of their streets and sidewalks. But the sense of verticality, achieved through cunning use of 3D technology, left the most enduring impression



DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE

The *GTA* series' tradition of catching the wider public's attention, albeit in ways many would rather it didn't, began with the original. BMG brought in the big guns for the game's launch – tabloid favourites Max Clifford Associates. Never known for avoiding controversy, the promotional campaign concentrated on the blatant criminality of the game. The most surprising events involving the company might suddenly be splashed across the national papers, often in distinctly larger than life fashion. "An accident in which I crashed my 1.0 litre Mini Metro into a tree became a full page story in the News Of The World, in which the 'Sick Car Crime Boss' wrote off his powerful XR2. My parents wanted to sue the paper," claims Baglow.

It was unusual for a game to find itself the subject of Newsnight and appearing in the tabloids, but as Anderson remembers, the DMA staff soon got into the spirit of things. "We were tired of reading loads of stuff in the papers that was blatantly false and made up. So rather than get annoyed we decided to get in on the act and started making stuff up, too. We had a bet going in the office at the time about who could get the most ridiculous lie printed about *GTA*."

Anderson scored high marks for the story of 'Sideways' Hank O'Malley. Supposedly he was an ex-country and western singer from the '60s, painstakingly tracked down to his new home conveniently just down the road from the DMA studios, and reunited across the Atlantic with his old backing band for the first time in years. In reality, however, singer Drew Larg played in a local covers band and his Alabama Bottle Boys were staff from DMA and a local music shop, which just goes to show that you shouldn't believe everything you read.





Mike Dailly's living city prototype was designed to allow collapsible buildings. Although never used, this feature stayed in until the final release



DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Everyone has their pet theory on the games that most influenced *Grand Theft Auto*, from obvious candidates such as *Turbo Esprit*, to the rather more esoteric 'living village' of Greendale in *Postman Pat's Trail Game*.

To try to find definitive answers we asked those who worked on the game what they thought the major influences were.

"*Mercenary*, *Elite* and *Syndicate* were three pertinent references for *GTA*'s perpetual design, because of their focus on play within strong microcosms instead of a rigid structure and challenges," says ex-BMG producer Gary Penn, revealing that fresh from producing *Frontier* for Gametek, the British tradition of open-ended games was firmly on his mind.

"We were trying to get a fun racing game past Dave [Jones], and *Micro Machines* with 'perspective' was what we had in mind at the time," remembers Dailly of these early prototypes.

"There were no games that were a major influence on the design – apart from maybe *Pac-Man*," replies Baglow, somewhat mischieviously.

Jones is perhaps more surprising in his choice: "Pinball. Lots of bonus multipliers, racking up of points, constant feedback.

team loved the idea of running over hundreds of zombies but we couldn't fit it into the structure and the time it'd take wasn't worth it. Everything zombie-related got dropped."

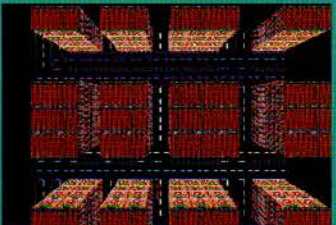
Missions weren't the only thing he remembers having to scale back. "There were a number of background 'living breathing city' features that got dropped. The player could break traffic light boxes and a repairman would wander around fixing them. Of course the player could kill the repairmen and stop all repairs. There was a TV crew that went to major accidents. This got dropped, though the TV van itself stayed in. *San Andreas* was supposed to have a tram system like San Francisco's cable cars, working similar to the train system, however we couldn't get it working nicely with regular traffic so it was removed, though the cable art stayed in."

The PlayStation version, although preserving the core of the game, lost even more features, including the fire engines and the trains. But 18 months into development, the entire city had to be razed and rebuilt, as Baird again recalls.

"Mike Dailly came up with a new technique to draw 24bit colour tiles instead of the low-res ones we were using. Technically, it was stunning for its time but it required every single tile and graphic in the game to be redrawn. We borrowed most of the artists in the company to blitz the tiles for an ECTS demo to show off this new style."

If a new feature promised a better game, then it was included seemingly irrespective of the extra cost. The new artwork added another 12 months to the schedule. As Baird puts it: "There was always an overall plan with *GTA*. However, the day-to-day development was more flying by the seat of our pants."

Fortunately, publisher BMG was generally sympathetic, with a very hands-on approach from producer Gary Penn. Relations with BMG in



The top-down perspective, showing the player from above, was explained as coming from the DMA News Chopper, hovering over the city

the US, however, were not always as smooth. As BMG took on more people from within the industry, some began to voice concerns, as Jones recalls: "We could not compete graphically with, say, *Ridge Racer*, so we were banking on the fact that the game was radical in terms of gameplay and its edgy content. The content side was never an issue. BMG supported us 100 per cent to put whatever we wanted into the game; coming from the music business nothing fazed them. It was a real shame to see BMG losing its fresh approach and become more like a games publisher. BMG US didn't think you could release a top-down game into the market. They said it would simply not sell and we should drop the title. This was only three months from completion. I was confident the sheer fun and originality factors would make it a success, and we also had great backing from BMG Europe. Luckily, we won the argument."

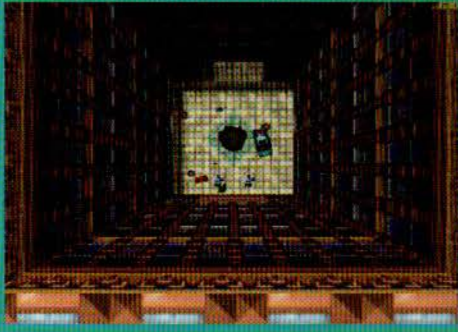
"BMG supported us 100 per cent to put whatever we wanted into the game; coming from the music business nothing fazed them"

Despite taking an entire year longer to produce than originally expected, Jones believes it was the right thing to do: "The extra time really benefited the game massively. We really pushed the boat out though on some areas such as audio, which I had not planned."

Fortunately, this resulted in another area in which the game took chances. "At that time most people's idea of good game audio was 'you didn't switch it off'," recalls audio director **Colin Anderson**. "I suggested that in order to add an interactive element to the music it might be nice to place them 'in the cars' as if they were coming out of the car stereo. That way, when a player got into a car the radio would start and when they got out it would stop: voila! Interactive audio. Once the idea of radio stations was established the rest was relatively obvious – DJs, news reports and different types of music for different types of car."

The radio stations also provided an added incentive to try the game's less powerful vehicles. With poor handling and low speed, the pickup would have been quickly abandoned if not for the guaranteed burst of spoof country and western. Anderson's approach was unorthodox, and also controversial. "There were a sizeable number of people who felt it was too radical," he says. "I knew that was total nonsense because films do it successfully all the time. Different styles successfully blended because they work in context with the visuals."

A diverse range of tunes was also needed to make the radio convincing "It wasn't good enough for the music to sound good enough for game music; people had to believe they were



Though it made workable the game's blend of 3D environments and scaled sprites, the fixed aerial view earned *GTA* an undeserved reputation for technological simplicity in later years. With the help of freeware tools, a more striking look at its cities is now possible

listening to real bands they just hadn't heard of," as Anderson puts it. This proved very useful – and was taken somewhat literally – by Baglow when publicising the game. "I let it be known that the bands and tracks were all real and licensed especially for the game," perhaps one of the more understandable exaggerations (see 'Don't believe the hype'). Sadly not all the audio work could be used. The tank, for example, lost an interesting sounding, if perhaps credibility-straining, version of the Star Spangled Banner.

With audio, graphics, the living city and the game's mission structure finally coming together, *Grand Theft Auto* was released to immediate success, justifying the enormous effort and compensating to some degree for the immense amount of lost work. Jones' determination, and BMG's indulgence, received their just rewards. Unfortunately, having helped to create such a success, BMG pulled out of the games market shortly afterwards, much to Jones' regret: "It helped create one of the biggest games ever but didn't stay around long enough to enjoy it. BMG really would have been great for the industry."

GTA is often seen as inventing the sandbox genre, but in truth it built upon a strong heritage of arcade and freeform games (see 'Driving under the influence'). Even the game's trademark carjacking had been seen in *Hunter* and *Mercenary* before that. Its unique achievement was to take the best from what had gone before and fuse it together with ambition, skill and incredible attention to detail. That process was a complicated one, but the idea at the heart of *GTA* wasn't. The word that comes up again and again when talking to its creators is 'fun'. If an opportunity arose to make the game more fun, no matter who it came from, and even if it meant throwing away a huge amount of work, it was seized with both hands. The series that resulted has been copied countless times, but few imitators have stoppped to think that the secret to its success may lie in the process, not the product.



As the music is supposedly coming from the car radio, it makes perfect sense that it becomes muffled as your car passes under a building. A little touch, but one that draws the player in



Ironically for a series that would become synonymous with the PlayStation, *GTA* was actually originally built as a PC game. A version for the console proved too tempting to pass up, however. Versions for the Saturn and Nintendo 64 were also planned, but dropped due to their relatively small user base

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Sega Racing Studio

DATE FOUNDED: April 2005

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 30 – and growing

KEY STAFF: Guy Wilday, studio director; Chris Southall, head of core technology

URL: racing.sega.co.uk



Recently founded, Sega Racing Studio is already hard at work on an update of the classic *Sega Rally*





LOCATION: Solihull, West Midlands



CURRENT PROJECTS: Sega Rally (360, PC, PS2, PS3, PSP)

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"The Sega Racing Studio was established in April 2005 and is our first internal development studio for Sega since Dreamcast. Our ambition is to creative innovative, cutting-edge games for the next generation of consoles. Our focus will not only be on re-inventing existing and established Sega IP, but also on developing completely new game designs and concepts. The studio is in continual growth and is currently made up of more than 30 of the most talented and creative developers from the finest in the games industry.

"The studio uses a pioneering game development model where small and focused development teams employ the tools and technology from a core technology group to create game content. Our intention is to have a number of game development teams working simultaneously to develop cross-platform games. The first team has been established, and we are now starting to recruit our next development team, along with additional staff to work in our core technology group.

"Based near Solihull in the West Midlands, the studio offers a working experience that realises all of our ambitions and values. The open-plan offices allow for an informal yet creative and exciting working environment.

"*Sega Rally* – a next generation version of the Sega classic is the first title from the studio and was recently announced and showcased at E3, where it was met with critical acclaim. 'Our aim is to set the benchmark for development of driving and racing games of the future. We have a highly talented and ambitious team who aim to push the boundaries of the racing genre. I genuinely believe that this is the most exciting opportunity in the gaming development community,' said studio director Guy Wilday."





The physics of middleware

With its PC PhysX chip finally launched, Ageia's next task is to encourage developers to create sophisticated physics simulations, but competitors like Havok are making their own moves



Manju Hegde, CEO, Ageia



Jeff Yates, VP of product management, Havok

Futurologists love to debate the effects of disruptive technology, but when it comes to physics middleware, the most disruptive element of Ageia's entrance into the market isn't its PhysX chip. Instead, it's the $60 million of investment it has raised from venture capitalists prepared to back its business plan of a PhysX chip in every PC gamer's system.

With the product only launched in May, that dream remains some way off, but the impact of the cash has been felt throughout the games industry.

Winners include one-time physics rivals such as German company Novodex and Swedish start-up Meqon. Both were snapped up to provide expertise as well as a Europe-based sales resource for the new company. Similarly, the remnants of UK physics pioneer MathEngine that weren't acquired by Criterion have also found their way into Ageia's armoury.

Another sector that's welcomed Ageia is development. With the company set to make its profits selling hardware to gamers, it has revolutionised the middleware pricing model by providing developers with technology at a nominal cost, as long as they promise to support the hardware in their PC games. The result is over 100 games in production using Ageia's smarts in some way.

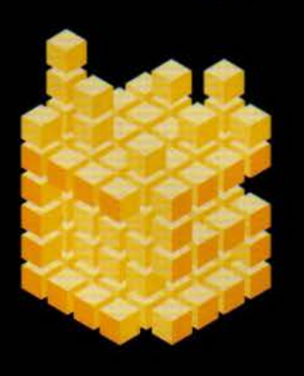
There's always a loser, though, and in this case it's Irish/American company Havok. The one-time de facto standard-bearer of game physics, with technology in titles such as *Halo 2* and *Half-Life 2*, its business model has been pulled from under its feet, as the six-figure cost of Havok's engine became unsustainable in the face of Ageia's freeware.

> **The six-figure cost of Havok's engine became unsustainable in the face of Ageia's freeware**

Instead, Havok has had to rethink its operation, branching out from standard rigid-body physics into new areas such as animation, as well as optimisations for multi-core processors – notably PS3's Cell. It's also trying to put a spanner in Ageia's business works by announcing an informal tie-up with graphics card companies for its technology, Havok FX (see 'Havok's revenge').

The ripples from Ageia have piqued concern in other business circles too. Graphics card companies such as Nvidia and ATI could see sales squeezed if lots of gamers decide to buy PhysX instead of upgrading their GPUs. Intel and AMD are also interested in this still tiny start-up that in the long-term could dilute the importance of the CPU for gamers – especially if, as planned, the PhysX chip ends up on PC motherboards. Alternatively, however, Ageia could drive sales of high-end PC gaming systems; at the moment it's too early to tell what the outcome will be. Even Microsoft, with its rumoured DirectPhysics initiative in mind, is said to have run a sliderule over the company.

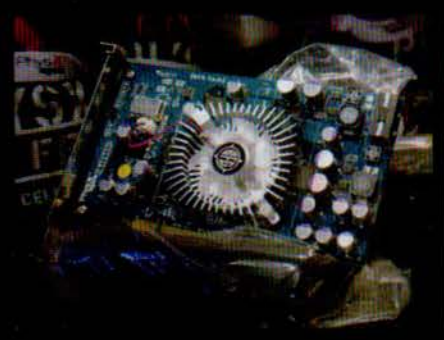
But what's crucial for the present is how many of the £200 PhysX cards Ageia



The key to PhysX's future success will be the ability of Unreal-engined PC games such as *Unreal Tournament 2007* to unleash imaginative uses for the powerful physics processor







Ageia's PhysX chip is available in the same configuration of retail boards from two manufacturers – BFG and Asus



The first example of what Ageia hopes will be a new era of physics-based gaming is its *CellFactor* demo

Getting games physical

If there's one thing everyone agrees about, it's that PhysX is a powerful piece of hardware. A 125 million-transistor chip, fabbed on a 13.4x13.4mm die at 130nm, it's distributed in a single configuration of 128MB of RAM by two board makers, BFG and Asus, as well as being integrated into complete PC systems from the likes of Dell, Alienware and Falcon Northwest

Ageia is keeping exact details of its architecture under wraps, but it's known to consist of several dozen programmable cores and an instruction set specifically for physics. The clever part of the design is the ability for the outputs of cores to be made available as inputs to other cores, generating large internal bandwidth which can handle multiple types of physics calculations simultaneously.

As an example, Hegde says it's possible to set up a scenario where PhysX is used to calculate the effect of a shell fired into a dam, which then fractures and breaks, releasing floodwater through a valley. In each case, the physics – from flight ballistics to fracture mechanics and fluid dynamics – would all be calculated on separate cores with the results of one section feeding into the overall simulation.

And it's this kind of sophisticated and interlinked behaviour Ageia is hoping to encourage. But as Hegde acknowledges, it will take time for such opportunities to drip through into commercially-available games.

"In the first games, physics is going to be cosmetic, but our goal is to get away from this as fast as we can," he says. "Physics affects gameplay deeply, so we are giving games designers some ideas and then trying to catalyse them to come up with much more creative things than we ever could."

The first example of is *CellFactor*, a single-level demo containing hundreds of physically-modelled objects. Created by Immersion Software and Artificial Studios, and paid for by Ageia, it adds telekinetic control as a weapon into a firstperson shooter setting, and will be freely available as both a single player and multiplayer experience.



will actually shift. Currently, there aren't enough games supporting the technology for it to appeal outside the hardcore overclocking community. In the case of Ubisoft's *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*, one ironic outcome of enabling PhysX was that the game's framerate dropped as the CPU and GPU had to deal with the additional processing required by the more detailed, physically-modelled explosions. The other was that Ubisoft used Havok's engine as the game's underlying physics middleware in the console versions, causing something of a marketing spat between Ageia and Havok.

Ageia CEO **Manju Hegde** is happy to be patient for the time being, however. "At the moment, there's not a lot of content," he concedes. "You'd expect people to think PhysX is expensive as there are only four games for it, but that will change with more games. In the second half of 2007, I expect a lot of developers who have licensed Unreal 3 [which features Ageia's physics engine as standard] to be shipping their games, and they will have Ageia fully integrated. By that point, there will be a big jump in the number of available titles."

So the key medium-term question will be whether the company can ramp up sales before it burns through its cash pile, and its investors try to sell the firm to potentially interested parties. Whatever Ageia's long-term destination, though, as an effective multi-million dollar subsidy to developers its largesse will long be remembered.



The first major commercial game to support PhysX is Ubisoft's *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* (above), which was recently backed up by Microsoft's *Rise of Legends* (left)



Havok's FX technology runs physics calculations on a PC's graphics card, but while it can generate pretty effects, it can't affect gameplay

Havok's revenge

With Ageia undercutting Havok's middleware business, the latter has reacted by coming up with its own version of hardware-based physics. The difference between Havok FX and PhysX, however, is that Havok FX is designed to run on graphics cards. The philosophy behind it is that with PhysX boards costing around £200, gamers will be more likely to buy another GPU and run their system in a dual graphics configuration such as Nvidia's SLI or ATI's CrossFire.

"If consumers are going to spring for an extra piece of hardware on their PC, it doesn't make sense to me they would buy something that may site idle while the physics is not active in the game," reckons **Jeff Yates**, Havok's vice president of product management. "An extra GPU can do physics or graphics."

The rub, however, is that Havok FX can only do what's known as cosmetic physics: graphics-aligned rigid-body simulations such as prettier explosions or particle effects. Because of the techniques Havok is using to enable the technology (Microsoft's Shader Model 3.0), it also can't affect gameplay physics in the same way that Ageia's PhysX enables. But with PhysX currently lacking high-profile PC games, the confusion sown by Havok FX may be enough for the company to consider it a successful diversionary tactic.

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

BACK TO THE FUTURE

BY JEFF MINTER

You do get some excellent taxi drivers in LA, I must say. We've had some right gems on this trip – one guy who kept making what sounded like bird noises into his phone for no apparent reason, another one yesterday who spent quite a long time emphatically telling us that he wasn't a taxi driver, he just drove a taxi, and one just now who brought us back from E3 to the hotel – he was completely, delightfully barking, a full-on David Icke believer who spent the whole trip ranting loudly about dragon statues and the fact that They were coming back and, on parting, told us that should we bump into Mr Icke we should tell him that the Armenian says hello. We're supposed to be off to a Korean district tonight for a Korean barbecue, and I'm glad he won't be driving us, because I bet there are lots of dragon decorations around there, and that would probably freak him right out.

> "Companies need to be a bit more adventurous. They should seek to develop a distinctive style that makes their games stand out"

It's been a moderately interesting E3 so far – unfortunately the most interesting stuff is being shown in a closed area of the Nintendo stand, and the queues to get in to see what is apparently just a handful of demo stations are absolutely stupid – four hours, some say, and I haven't been arsed to stand there for that long yet. Bit silly really, even if I can't get a go straight away myself it would at least be good to be able to watch others playing. As a result, my first hands-on experience of using a tiltable controller came from playing *Warhawk* on the PS3 rather than from the Wii.

For the most part what I've seen here so far is a lot of games that certainly look impressive – shinier, higher-res, with this gen's cool effects (HDR lighting, motion blur) as opposed to last gen's (lens flare, anybody?) but, with a few exceptions (and of course I can't comment on the Wii, not yet having spent four hours of my life in a queue to get to the handful of demo stations on offer), I get the feeling that games are getting more homogeneous. I lost count of the number of games I saw with sword-wielding dudes all with the same swishing-polygon-trail effect from the tips of their swords, war games with loads of people charging about on horses (loads of people onscreen is another This Gen Big Thing), military FPSes of various eras, driving games and sports games the same as last gen but a bit shinier, online RPGs with sufficient dragons in that it'd give the Armenian gibbering nightmares – and in the end you lose track, everything blurs together and it all looks pretty similar; 360 games look like PS3 games look like PC games. There are a few notable exceptions – *Dead Rising* looks like fantastic fun (yes, it's doing the hip loads-of-people thing but it looks lovely and appears to be splendidly humorous and I can't help but think it'll be an absolute hoot to play), and *Viva Piñata* appears to be successfully pursuing a completely distinctive and charming graphical style.

Such standouts are lamentably rare, though, with the result that I tend to amble round the show in a state of somewhat dazed polygonal amnesia. Yes, it's apparent that people are working their GPUs nicely, but they all seem to be working them the same way. There's very little that makes me throb at the gusset with longing, or even to prefer one system over another (again I'm refraining from judging Nintendo, having been unwilling to queue for four hours for a Wii. Sorry, no more Wii jokes, I promise).

I can't help but wonder if this trend for producing lots of mega-epic games that in the end all tend to look and play somewhat alike is something that the industry can sustain indefinitely. Don't get me wrong, they definitely have their place – I'm happily playing my way through *Oblivion* on the 360 at the moment, and it's really lovely and well worth the investment. But I, like most gamers, only have finite money and time to invest in such games. I might buy three or four such in the course of a year. I do love to have a nice, meaty game I can get absorbed into and which will last me for weeks or months of gaming, but I don't tend to play such games more than one at a time. The very nature of such games means that they are incredibly expensive to create and this is reflected in the higher price of games these days. Most users will probably only want one good example of each of the many swishing-polygon-sword or lots-of-people-on-horses or military FPS games at a time, so I can't help but think that only a few of them are going to recoup the cost involved in making them.

I think companies need to be a bit more adventurous in their game designs. They should seek to develop a distinctive style that makes their games stand out, to inspire in gamers some kind of enthusiasm as opposed to simply selecting the best implementation of yet another version of the same old existing genres, which is pretty much what buying games is like most of the time these days. The world needs more *Katamari Damacys* and fewer slightly-more-detailed-FPSes-with-nicer-explosions-and-oh-yes-HDR-effects, please.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser



Illustration: tstokes

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

TEXT SPEAK

BY TIM GUEST

In the spring of 1979, on Essex University's DEC 10 mainframe, Roy Trubshaw constructed a text-based world that people could share: the first Multi-User Dungeon, or MUD. Back then, there was an experimental packet-switching system linking Essex University to ArpaNet in the USA. Within a year, people were logging on from halfway around the world. It was our first shared virtual space: even if they'd never met in the flesh, in this new text-only place, players could meet, talk and fight. They could even alter the structure of the world.

Over the next few years, a few people made some small money but none of those pioneers had anything like the success of the multi-million dollar operations of virtual worlds today. In fact, now, we seem to have left those text-based worlds behind. Text-only games still have their proponents (cinema didn't replace the book, they argue, so why should graphical games replace text-based ones?) but the fact is, at first sight, all our modern virtual worlds are graphical. Still, doesn't most of the communication in virtual worlds still take place through text? Could an examination of text-based games help us understand the global phenomenon of virtual worlds?

My own introduction to the ways computers could create a world was through singleplayer versions of these MUDs. In 1980, when my father worked at a technology mall in San Jose, I would visit him at weekends, spin on a swivel chair, and type 'Go East', 'Hit Dwarf', and laugh as I read about the Dwarf knocking me dead. These games were many peoples' first step through the TV screen to the world on the other side; in the '80s, with the rise of Infocom, they blossomed; in the '90s they disappeared.

Almost. In the last half-decade, a near-natural language system for developing 'interactive fiction' has arisen, with an international community dedicated to developing text games into complex interactive literary works. They've also toiled to make it easier for others to do the same. Infocom's original engine was complex and LISP-based. Now, to build a world, you can type nearly human-sounding sentences ('Brightness is a kind of value. The brightnesses are guttering, weak, radiant and blazing'). Inform, the assembler, parses your sentences into a variant of ZIL, text-adventure giant Infocom's 25-year-old language for making worlds out of words.

But, like books, most of these worlds are solitary experiences. The history of text-only shared virtual worlds is spotted at best. In 2000, Richard Bartle, who took over MUD development from Roy Trubshaw at Essex in 1980, spent a long year as head of online games for a start-up company. With a team of six and a budget of almost zero, Bartle developed a sex-focused, text-only virtual world, with some radically new features never seen in games before (room descriptions that were sense-specific, for example, that would be described in terms of sound or heat). Nonetheless, after eight months, the game was cancelled. Five years later, Bartle still argued the text-only form can handle concepts such as multiple perspectives, or more abstract narrative experiences that graphical games struggle with.

> DeLappe's words seemed to offend other America's Army players more than the simulated experience of being shot in the head

His point, one that artists have made for years, is that the imagination trumps the real.

Now, in games where meticulously illustrated 3D violence is run-of-the-mill, one artist who wants to have a stronger impact has resorted to simple text. **Joseph DeLappe**, Associate Professor at the University of Iraq, logs into the servers of 'America's Army' (a US military 'playable recruiting tool') and broadcasts the names of America's war-dead.

"I enter the game using as my login name, 'dead-in-iraq' and proceed to type the names," he says. "I'm a neutral visitor as I don't participate in the proscribed mayhem. Rather, I stand in position and type until I'm killed. Upon being reincarnated I continue to type. To date, I have input just over 250 names. I intend to keep doing so until the end of this war."

›MICHAEL VANN JOHNSON JR. 25, NAVY, MAR 25, 2003

› 'dead in iraq', are you enlisted? reserve? Have you been to iraq?

›ARMONDO ARIEL GONZALEZ, 25, MARINE, APR 14 2003

› 'dead in iraq', shut the **** up!

DeLappe's words seem to offend other players more than the simulated experience of being shot in the head. In response to a recent pro-3D world piece by Cory Ondrejka, called 'Ce n'est pas un monde virtuel', Richard Bartle wrote: 'In a textual world, I can stand in my own mouth, seeing my surroundings get light and dark as I open and close it. I can be part of a painting I am carrying under my arm. I can have internal organs. I can photograph an opinion. I can unerupt a volcano, store the world in a box, hold a soul in the palm of my hand, dance with the colour cyan. Do that in your 3D world.'

Elsewhere, he writes, 'I prefer text: the pictures are better.'

Tim Guest is working on a book about virtual worlds. Contact him if you have a virtual tale to tell via tim@timguest.net

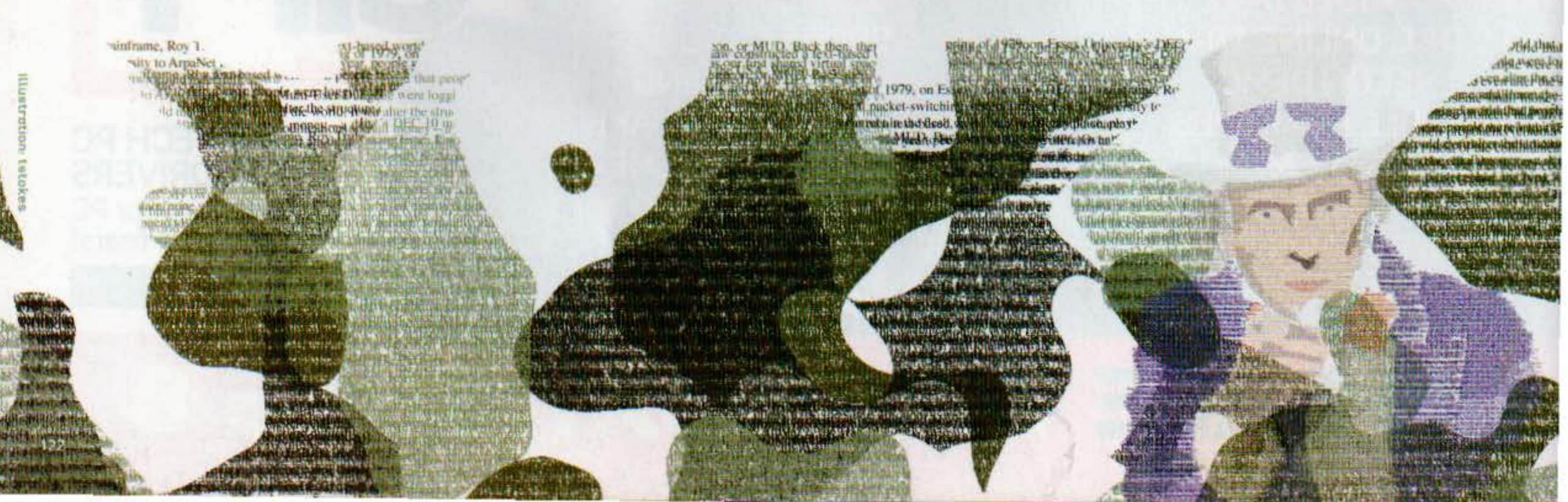


Illustration: tetakes

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

FEELING GREEN

BY MR BIFFO

I've always struggled to finish books. Don't get me wrong; I love to read. Heck, I probably buy a book a week, or thereabouts. Wherein lies the problem; I tend to buy a new book before I've finished my last book. There's a stack of books beside my bed – novels, biographies, graphic novels, travel books – all of them with a page folded over approximately three-quarters of the way in.

Unfortunately, this problem has now migrated to games. The only 360 game I've finished to date is *Call Of Duty 2*. And even that statement is a big lie, because I actually finished the PC version, but couldn't be bothered to live through the horrors of World War II a second time. Or umpteenth time if you count its precursor, and all the other World War II games.

While I'm sure this problem has as much to do with me as anything, there are some examples where I know full well that it's the fault of the game. Sort of. Ish. Or rather, it's a combination of the two things. To wit: the age demographic of the games market is sweeping upwards, as gamers raised on a diet of *Hungry Horace* and *Pitfall* are failing to leave games behind as they creak into middle age. Consequently, we've all been there, done that, and got the experience points to prove it.

I mean, let's take *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. Gorgeous isn't it? It's a fat, sweaty, love-in of a trad RPG. So much depth, such variety. All those people who speak in one of the same three voices... If you enjoy RPGs there's little doubt this is, as the young people say, the shit.

Except I've barely scratched the surface of the game, and I can't really be arsed to play any more. I've shut the first Oblivion gate, and the thought of going through that again and again injects my buttocks with apathy. I mean, how many Tolkein-homaging, quasi-medieval worlds am I expected to explore in my life? How many times am I going to literally visit Hell? How many taverns must I enter in order to seek rest and a quest (now there's a slogan: "Rest and a Quest – enquire within"). As wonderful as the graphics are, as awe-inspiring as the scale may be, I feel like I've already played and finished *Oblivion* a dozen times over.

Same thing happened with *Black*. I loved playing it at first. All that gun scat, or whatever they called it, proper floated my love boat. But after a while I just switched off; both literally and figuratively. I'd seen it before. I mean, if you really liked potatoes, if they were all you ever ate, chances are you'd soon crave something else. Or find new ways to cook them at least.

> If you really liked potatoes, if they were all you ever ate, chances are you'd soon crave something else, or new ways to cook them

In the case of both *Black* and *Oblivion* my issues have nothing to do with the gameplay, or visuals, or anything like that. As examples of their respective genres, both *Oblivion* and *Black* are way up there. Yet rather than try to come up with some new places for us to visit, all they do is refine what's gone before. It's like recycling a tin can into an identical tin can, but with a sticker that reads 'NEW AND EXCITING CAN!'

This is why *Half-Life 2* remains such a benchmark. Even a few years on, there still hasn't been another game to feature such a compelling, and original, world (sorry, *Shadow Of The Colossus* fans – great monsters, coupled to an average fantasy environment). Admittedly, *Half-Life 2* borrowed heavily from The Big Book Of Post-Apocalyptica. Yes, it doffed its cap to George A Romero. But it was the sum of its parts. It fashioned them into something different. Somewhere you wanted to explore, and return to. Something we hadn't seen before.

There's nothing remotely surprising about the worlds in *Oblivion* and *Black*. There are no twists in the tales. They just sort of plod along, checking boxes. In the case of the latter those boxes are crates. Crates that we've all seen a million billion times before.

Having a rant about originality in games is about the most unoriginal thing I could possibly do, but never before has it stopped me finishing games. This isn't even about originality, it's about me becoming more difficult to please. I don't even mind if gameplay is unoriginal any more – so long as it's well done. And in both *Oblivion* and *Black* the gameplay is very well done. If you wanted a traditional RPG, or a traditional firstperson shooter, you couldn't hope to find two better examples.

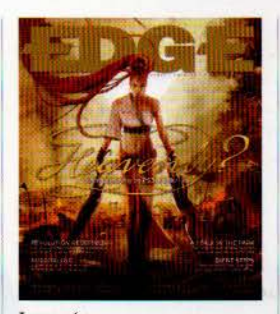
It's like if you go and see certain genres of film, you expect certain things from them. Yet at the same time you want to feel that you're watching something new, even if the structure and underlying mechanics are exactly the same as every other film of that genre. *Oblivion* doesn't try to be anything new. It just makes it bigger, and better looking.

Maybe I'm becoming jaded, and if I am the chances are other gamers of my generation are too. There are a lot of 30-something gamers now – more than there have ever been. And chances are we've all seen it before, and we're all going to become increasingly difficult to please. Games firms can't just keep throwing the same clichés at us and expect us to keep swallowing them. Not without getting a face-full of 30-something vomit.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television


Illustration: tstokes





Issue 164

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Killing gets...boring

I want to create, not destroy. With the power available today, and the potential inherent in an interactive medium, the possibilities for creation seem vast and exciting.
erekose200

I don't look at it as killing. Just lining things up and pressing a button at the right time. It doesn't matter if you're watering a flower or getting a headshot. *Pokemon Snap* looked like an on-rails shooter to me, but without the urgency.
freethinker

Killing gets *boring*? Remember the chainsaw controller for *RE4*. Imagine a Wii controller like that! WRRRR, WRRRR! DIE zombie, DIE!!!!
hunk

Yes, but it's 'killing gets boring' not 'killing is boring'. There is a lot to be said for violent games and games with a graphic nature, but if that's all there is then sometimes it can get boring.
Exit

Something I'd love to see in a future games console would be a consistent currency. You know how games have individual currencies – rupees, gil, meseta, coins, dollars, points etc etc – well, I'd like to see a games console that has its own economy. It would be a bit like the Gamerscore system on 360, but less about competition and more about an overarching sense of reward. Your account would be part of your profile, and money (or points, or whatever) earned in one game could then be transferred to whichever game you play next. Imagine that you have a bunch of leftover *Burnout* points after completing the game – maybe you could use them to give yourself a headstart in *Oblivion* with a little cash bonus, or unlock some cheats in a game you're having trouble cracking. We could restrict it to just dealing with unlockable bonus content, and every game should be ultimately self-sufficient in terms of 'money' you can earn, and what it can buy you. I see that it's a system rife with pitfalls – obsessive players would ruin any sense of balance (but they do that with pretty much everything), while MS/Sony etc would have to employ their own accountants to manage the system and police it for every game released – but, personally, I'd love to have it, or at least see someone try it.
Robert Halliwell

And if you could spend them on Marketplace items would you ultimately need to be taxed on your winnings?

I was surprised by the obtuseness of the mobile game industry execs you interviewed in the last issue of **Edge**. By far the most serious reason gamers don't play games on their mobiles is because the offerings are on the whole awful. Even in the few cases when the games themselves are decent (and, even rarer, actually playable on the small screens and uncomfortable keypads they're made for), these games will often be burdened with the weight of a desktop or console brand such as *Tomb Raider*, *Splinter Cell* or *NFS*, whose experience they cannot even hope to approximate. Do these soulless marketing robots not understand that a fan of the originals will be turned off by an underpowered phone version? Or do they think they are dealing with mindless, rabid teenagers who will claw at the shop windows to get their hands on a half-inch-tall version of Lara? The scurrilous way in which these pathetic ports are timed to coincide with a new console/PC instalment is doubly condescending. The publishers have raped and tortured their IP, starved it half to death to make it fit into tighter clothes, slapped a bucketload of make-up to cover the bloodshot eyes and hollowed cheeks, and then wonder why nobody wants to sleep with it.

The publishers have tortured their IP, starved it half to death to make it fit into tighter clothes and then wonder why nobody wants to sleep with it

This is not to say that there is no way to make decent mobile games out of console IPs, if you are prepared to radically adapt the gameplay, as was done in games like *Metal Gear Acid*. But if you must use existing IP rather than make original games, why not plunder the vast buried wealth of 2D games from the '80s and '90s, which would all be far more suited for the dinky handsets people play on without insulting them by offering a reductive version of their console experiences.
M. Papadopulos

Microsoft's announcement of Live Anywhere has changed the whole complexion of mobile phone gaming, and almost certainly for the better.

I fell asleep recently while playing *GTAIII*. I wasn't deathly bored or anything, just dead tired since it was about 4am and I'd been running all over the shop that day. As I drifted off, I could hear my car crashing and horns blaring as I reversed towards my snoozy doom, but it didn't wake me – a minute or two later I was jolted awake, not by my vehicle exploding or whatever happened, but by the fade-in of traffic and pedestrians as I respawned outside the city hospital.

Nothing lulls me to sleep as effectively as winding down by messing about in free-roaming games like *GTA*. Anyone else feel the same?
Julie Lloyd

Final Fantasy XII is a particularly strong candidate for gaming-as-sedative, not least because the Gambit system provides a perfect safety net should you doze off mid-dungeon.

I surely cannot be the only person to experience an animated feeling of dread at the announcement of a *World Of WarCraft* movie? As gamers we are often subjected to the derisory sneering of non-gamers who accuse the videogame industry of being responsible for anything from childhood obesity to the Cuban missile crisis. However when the opportunity to reach out via different media, in

this case film, the non-gaming public is most often subjected to a series of lamentable excursions into the heady realm of woefulness. While most people are no doubt familiar with the feeling of trepidation that comes from doubting the sequel to a favoured film can offer the same level of enjoyment, as far as videogames-as-movies are concerned such doubts surface from the moment the film is announced. Can the *Halo* movie really offer anything approaching the appeal of the game? It seems doubtful.

But for *WOW*, far more is riding on the film than the potential embarrassment of finding itself nestled between Alone In The Dark and Street



Ian Jackson suggests that a film-of-the-game only work if the game has failings it can fix

I'm not sure what Gandling is doing in Scholo, but having killed him a dozen times over I notice that the Western Plague Lands is still crawling with undead

Fighter on IMDB's worst film website. The *WarCraft* movie has the potential to address *WOW*'s most obvious failing, its storyline. No matter how many times I have delved into Scholomance or Molten Core, the sense of why I am doing it is drowned out by the simple fact that I'm actually there to collect things. While Blizzard has worked hard to create a vibrant back story to the game it has become somewhat lost in translation. I'm not sure what Gandling is doing in Scholo, but having killed him a dozen times over I notice that the Western Plague Lands is still crawling with undead. The inability to affect the game world in any significant way is of course, unavoidable, if Gandling could be truly destroyed, then it would have already been done so by one of the professional *WOW*ers that spend more time in Azeroth than in the real world. Which makes the concept of a film, untainted by chat panels filled with Americans calling each other 'douches', free from unending 'WTS shovel 200g', 'I pwned his ass' and 'LFG UBRS', all the more appealing.

All the more appealing that is, if the movie is actually any good. And call me daddy foresight if you will, but the chances of someone making a decent game-inspired movie is up there with the chance of China suddenly deciding to write off the US deficit in return for the rights to produce a Chinese version of MacGyver. And yet like most **Edge** readers, I expect I will ignore the potentially negative reviews, grit my teeth through the shaky CGI Tauren in the trailers and sit there on opening night amidst the teenagers dressed as Murlocks clutching replica epic weaponry and duelling flags in the hope someone will indulge them. That having been said, if the film opens with a gnome warrior in Ironforge who is 'WTB crusader and has the mats,' then I'm going home.
Ian Jackson

After the disappointment of Silent Hill, surely sheer weight of numbers means that one of these films will come out right. Maybe WOW will be it

The entire world seems intent on drilling into me the 'fact' that Sony is doomed. Dead. Defeated. Ruined. And why? Because its E3 conference was a bit duff and the PS3's launch price is higher than we expect to pay these days. Wow! I mean, what judge wouldn't bring their hammer down on that one, rattling off a death sentence at these crimes? It's like there's this self-imposed duty to decide at every single step of a console's pregnancy whether it will rule the universe or crash badly – and nothing in between – based on new information, however small. How about a bit of balance, eh? The price is more than we seem to think is fair, but not by £20 million. The hardware is being self-consciously revisionist, but that's Sony's impetus, and the machine is still in development. Imagine all the prototypes and misfires for Wii that Nintendo could've rolled out if it had wanted to show off somewhat earlier, before settling on its final design and functions. There's a big debate to be had about it all, sure, but I don't see how any fair-minded discussion could terminate with the complete collapse and withdrawal from the console market for any of the big three.

Microsoft seems pretty healthy, despite the mumbles of derision that accompanied the run up to launch for both Xbox and 360, and persisted for at least a year afterward in the case of the former. Nintendo seems pretty healthy, despite however many analysts have priced them out of the running in the past few years. Sony, too – healthy, if no longer looking like it has superhuman powers. I didn't come away from E3 2006 with a Sony-flavoured glow, true, but c'mon, even if the changes in the console's feature set look like a kneejerk, the people who make the games – the ones that you, I and everyone else out there have loved – aren't kneejerk idiots.

And some PS3 games looked a bit crummy – yeah, like we've never encountered that in a pre-release period. I take issue with Sony's doublespeak, self-promotion and miraculous promises, of course, but that's all beside the point here. We've all heard Sony beat its chest dozens of times before, maybe even gotten used to it, but we also know that it doesn't mean anything. And if it did, then look at what it did for PS2, eh? I'm sure this inevitable post-E3 ranting – both mine and that of those I mention above – are like a special kind of videogame, a point 'n' click that we invent between ourselves, to let off steam and keep us ticking over until the consoles and games actually get released.
Brian Galliers

What this E3 proved yet again, if more clearly than ever before, is that there isn't a straight console war to be won anymore: the manufacturer's agendas are simply too diverse to compare.

Continued



Topic: How would you change the industry?
Or what game would you make that would make people take a step back and see things differently?
Djorn

I'd bring back the 5-day week and 8-hour day. A product would be finished when it was finished, rather than slaughtering people to get it out unfinished for the holiday season. So to conclude, I'd look after developers and fuck the publishers.
Kinkster

If only video game development software could be as easy as, say, Cubase is to make music. We could buy a home version of Renderware which comes with a firewire GPU and physics box to boost your computer's power. That is what I would create to change the industry. Isn't the British game industry founded on bedroom coders who cut their teeth making published AAA games when they were teenagers? It's as if the games industry is going backwards compared to the music industry.
monkeytown

Of course, gaming technology is changing at a pace music and movies haven't seen in a long time. Despite electricity, a guitar is still a guitar, and a keyboard is still a keyboard: if you could play one then, you can play one now. Conversely, just because you could program a computer 10 years ago, doesn't mean you can program one now - the jump from sprites to polygons alone is huge, not to mention threading, physics, etc. Music and movies are fairly unified as industries, with standardised hardware, yet gaming is still cut-throat, every-man-for himself, and completely pitted against itself: would music and movies be so huge if there weren't unified platforms for them to be created and experienced?
RandomExcess

I hate people. A few minutes in my local shopping centre reminds me that people and I do not get on.

I mention my general dislike of people because I believe it is a part of what drew me into videogaming. Characters in videogames do not disappoint. They are there for a specific purpose and they do what they're supposed to. They're predictable, and they don't have feelings. Like the pastime itself they are disposable, and require simply as much or as little of your time as you are willing to give.

Why, then, must the powers-that-be insist on pushing us all together in the online arena? The answer it seems is a tryingly familiar one: money.

City Of Heroes and *Star Wars Galaxies* are just two recent major game releases that have actively excluded those who are not online. Videogame manufacturers are no longer restricted to gouging us at the cash register, but are instead free to continue doing so month after month for however long you play their game. I believe that having bought a PC for around £1,000, then £30 for a game, that's where my spending should stop, but it seems not. To play the game you need broadband at around £20 per month, and then you have to pay the monthly fee to keep playing it. Has everyone lost their minds? The consoles are emulating this style of online community-building now too, but I don't want it.

It is puzzling that so much attention has been focussed on the rising levels of advertisements and product placement in games, many believing they will cheapen or in some way ruin the videogame experience, and yet nothing is mentioned about this (in my opinion) worrying trend.

Unable to find sufficient 'wow factor' in any of the new releases for the current consoles, the companies have actually taken to using the online capabilities as selling points for both games and consoles. It is obviously becoming a shield with which to defend bland and uninspired game releases.

What once was a fairly interesting addition to the experience is threatening to take it over completely, and with all of the next-generation consoles pushing their online package as main selling points it's only going to get worse. Maybe I will have to get over my crushing hatred of people other than myself and get a broadband connection, but not just yet.

Jonathan Mack

But isn't the value of the new online services that they also bring free advantages, like game demos?



Topic: Best character design

Pyramid Head all the way to the bank.
Shinji

AGRO!!
Djorn

The lemmings from *Lemmings*, probably the most immense pixel-to- character ratio ever.
AJ-D

I once had a cleaner on *Theme Park* who'd put in 45 years of hard service. For some reason he never went on strike when I couldn't cough up the wages. He was fast and efficient too. Unfortunately, he was made redundant as the result of an overly ambitious and unfinished rollercoaster. Fucking hell, I missed him.
equinox_code

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Crashlander

BY JAMES HUTCHINSON

HELL OF A QUEUE FOR THE TOILETS...

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Edge 165
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